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Boundaries shown on this map are those of the Republic of Belarus, and do not include the entire Belarusian ethnic territory parts of which extend into neighboring states.

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EDITOR'S DESK

West Pushing for A Dialogue And Free Elections in Belarus

Addressing the then upcoming presidential elections in Belarus, we wrote the following in BR's spring issue: "Some members of the opposition feel that, at the very least, the campaign will highlight the fact that Łukaŝenka's term will expire in July 1999. After that, the West would have to consider Łukaŝenka a political usurper and deal with him accordingly ... Some would say ... the campaign brought the quarrelsome opposition together in its fight to restore the democratic process in the country."

As it turns out, the opposition's "unity" didn't even last through the May 16 election date. One of the two presidential candidates, exiled Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) leader Zianon Paŭniak, withdrew his candidacy a few days before the end of the election campaign. Paŭniak accused fellow candidate Michaił Ćyhir, of collusion with Moscow and electoral commission chairman, Viktor Hančar, of doctoring voter turnout figures. Paŭniak then appealed to BPF members to stop their participation in his campaign and urged the public to boycott the election. CEC chairman Hančar was forced to declare the elections invalid, blaming the government for disrupting the election process and Mr. Paŭniak for his eleventh hour withdrawal.

On May 30, the BPF held a meeting to assess with hindsight its campaign strategy and consider Paŭniak's proposal for the reorganization of the Front. Paŭniak had also advised that the Front leadership take no part in the upcoming OSCE-sponsored talks between the government and the opposition in Bucharest, Rumania. Those present at the meeting balked at both recommendations.

It is interesting to note that while Paŭniak had nothing good to say about the unsanctioned presidential elections, Western leaders had been viewing the elections as a positive event. Ambassador Daniel Speckhard, for example, during his May 4 press briefing in Miensk had this to say: "The U.S. Government sees these [May 16 elections] as an expression by the opposition of their desire for strengthening of democratic institutions and their desire to have a dialogue with the people of Belarus. Our hope is that the government of Belarus will look for an opportunity to establish constructive dialogue with the opposition to resolve the problems that are occurring as a result of the government's different steps against the opposition. And we think it is very important for the government to dialogue without intimidation as response to these May 16 elections."

The U.S. Department of State issued a statement on May 20 in which it condemned the Belarusian government for suppressing the elections and described them as an effort to engage in a dialogue with the Belarusian people. It called on the Belarusian government "to change course" and

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open an unconditional dialogue with the democratic opposition. On May 25, Rep. Christopher Smith, chairman of the Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, said that the ballot "served as an important barometer of democratic engagement by the citizens of Belarus" and urged that the Belarusian government "immediately, without precondition, convene a genuine dialogue with the country's democratic forces."

The North Atlantic Assembly, on May 30, issued a statement underlining the fact that President Łukaŝenka's term in office will expire on July 20, 1999, and that "he

cannot be considered a democratically elected head of state" after that date. On June 3, the European Commission wrote that "considering the circumstances in which the voting took place, these [May 6-16] elections could not be recognized by the international community" and that "the only possible and peaceful way out of the present constitutional impasse in Belarus is an open and constructive dialogue between the government and the opposition." (see LETTERS). The 41-nation Council of Europe, on June 9, urged Belarus to hold free elections under international control. The council stated that "internationally observed and accepted free and fair elections will be the first step toward rebuilding Belarus' relations with the Council of Europe."

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was charged with organizing the talks scheduled to take place in Bucharest on June 11-14. The OSCE invited representatives of the government, opposition and NGOs to attend, but the government, after some vacillation, announced on June 10 it would not send its representatives to Bucharest, saying such talks should be held at home.

Still, the OSCE decided to go ahead with the talks. After their conclusion, Adrian Severin, former Foreign Minister of Rumania representing the OSCE, said that the main goal of the meeting was to find a "solution on how to hold free and fair elections [in Belarus] ... which could be recognized on both the domestic and interna-

tional level." He added that the meeting was successful in working out a single stance for the Belarusian opposition on the issue of elections, and that the meeting had inaugurated a "long and difficult process" of political dialogue in Belarus. (Presumably Mr. Severin was the parliamentary elections mandated to take place next year according by both the 1994 and 1996 constitutions.)

One can only wonder why Łukaŝenka refused to participate in the Bucharest talks with the opposition. Perhaps he felt talks without a government presence would even further split the opposition, already weakened by the election fiasco, and allow him to weather the July 20 date. Whatever Łukaŝenka's reasons, his decision not to attend the talks must be viewed as a setback for the Western governments and the opposition alike. The "long and difficult process" might in fact prove to be too long for Belarus to survive as an independent and sovereign country, considering Łukaŝenka's all-out push for absorption of Belarus by Russia.

The opposition has had five years to get its act together. Unfortunately, it has failed to learn how to be an effective political force; most of its energy during this time has been wasted on internal squabbling. The concepts of compromise and consensus, the essential tools that make democracy work, seem to be foreign to its leaders. Consequently, a multitude of miniscule "movements," "parties" and "po-

litical groups" have come into existence. These are run by dogmatic, egocentric leaders who are endlessly feuding with each other, making the ground fertile for dictatorship to flourish. We hope the opposition in Belarus will learn its lesson one day — and hopefully not too late.

The first test will come when the BPF holds its first post-election conference in Minsk on July 31

Acknowledgments

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Correction

The spring issue (Vol. 11, No. 1) of BR refers to the "Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development" and its acronym "OECD" in the paragraph starting on the bottom of page 10. Instead, it should refer to the "Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe" and its acronym "OSCE."

Joe Price, Editor

The Tragedy in Minsk

Belarusian Review expresses its deepest sympathy and condolences to the families and friends of those who perished or were injured in the May 30 accident near the Niamiha subway station in Minsk.

Belarusian Review hopes that the investigation of the circumstances of this tragic event will be conducted in a thorough and objective way.

FEATURES

U.S. Department of State Report on Human Rights Practices in Belarus for 1998

PART II

Part I of the U.S. Department of State Report on Human Rights Practices in Belarus for 1998, released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor on February 26, 1999, was covered in the spring issue of BR. Part II follows.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties:

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for freedom of peaceful assembly; however the Government restricts this right in practice. Organizers must apply at least 15 days in advance to local officials for permission to conduct a demonstration, rally, or meeting. The local government must respond with a decision not later than 5 days prior to the scheduled event.

In March 1997, President Lukashenko issued decree number five to regulate what he termed the "orgs" of street protests taking place. The decree further limited citizens' ability to assemble peacefully by restricting the locations where rallies may take place and allowing local authorities to put strict limits on the number of participants. The decree also prohibited the display of unregistered flags and symbols, as well as placards bearing messages deemed threatening to the State or public order (see Section 2.a.). The decree, along with subsequent amendments adopted by the acting legislature, imposed severe penalties on those who violate the law, particularly the organizers of events. Although the decree allows for either monetary fines or detention for up to 15 days, courts frequently impose high fines knowing that those convicted

cannot pay. When individuals fail to pay fines, authorities threatened to confiscate their property. The courts punished organizers of rallies with fines of \$800 to \$1,000, which are exceptionally high in a country where the average monthly wage is under \$100. Although assessments were made, there were no known instances of property actually being confiscated as of year's end.

Public demonstrations occurred frequently in Minsk but were always under strict government control including through open videotaping of the participants by the police and plainclothes security officers. Demonstrations were less frequent in other parts of the country, particularly in the east, close to the border with Russia. In contrast to prior practices, the authorities in Minsk generally did not deploy riot police in a blocking pattern across the planned routes of demonstration marchers. This helped to reduce tensions and resulted in fewer clashes during demonstrations. However, following some sanctioned and unsanctioned demonstrations, police and other security officials continued to round up, beat, detain, and coerce forced confessions out of some demonstration participants (See Section 1.d.).

On June 17, following numerous complaints filed by citizens and 2 days of public hearings, the Minsk City Council passed a resolution that called for the Ministry of Interior to consider ways of preserving public order during demonstrations that did not violate civil rights, and to increase the personal accountability of its officers. The City Council also called on the State Procurator's office to investigate allegations of abuses that took place during the year. At year's end, the effect of this resolution on the behavior of executive branch-controlled security forces remained unclear.

During the February trial of Aleksey Shidlovskiy and Vadim Labkovich (see Section 1.e.), police detained a number of persons who had been denied access to the courthouse and were forced to wait outside while the hearings proceeded. On February 23, police arrested three 16-year-old members of the opposition-affiliated Youth Front and a human rights monitor from the Belarusian Helsinki Committee for holding an "unsanctioned demonstration." Also in February, several members of the Youth Front were detained briefly by police in Minsk for posting announcements about a demonstration already sanctioned by governmental authorities.

On March 15, following a small and peaceful demonstration march in Minsk in commemoration of the anniversary of the adoption of the 1994 Constitution, police briefly detained Social Democratic chairman Nikolai Statkevich for allegedly stepping into a lane not authorized for marching. All charges were dropped against Statkevich by court order, 5 days after his arrest. On March 22, following an opposition-organized protest march, which had proceeded peacefully with the permission of governmental authorities, riot police and plainclothes security officials rounded up march participants and journalists in various locations around Minsk. Three observers from the Belarusian Helsinki Committee also were briefly detained.

On March 30, city authorities denied permission to the opposition (BNF) and Belarusian Social Democratic Party to hold a rally in downtown Minsk on April 2 against the Belarus Union Charter with Russia. Permission was denied on the grounds that such a rally would interfere with government festivities planned for the same day. Minsk city authorities decided instead that the opposition rally could be held outside the city 3 days after government-sponsored festivities. When Youth Front members nevertheless staged a small protest on April 2 during the government-sponsored event, police and

plainclothes security officials reportedly arrested and beat a number of them (see Section 1.c.).

On April 25, at least 5,000 persons took part in a government-approved march and rally in Minsk to mark the 12th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe. The march and rally themselves passed peacefully without incident. However, following the event, police and plainclothes security officials detained over 30 Belarusian participants—including minors—according to credible reports from local human rights groups. Some of those detained claimed that they were beaten and forced to sign false statements (see Section 1.c.). Government authorities also detained between 15 and 25 Russians (mainly members of the Moscow-based antifascist Youth Action Organization) who had participated in the event. The Russians subsequently were deported from the country.

On May 1, according to the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, plainclothes security officers detained and beat 15 members of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party who had participated in a demonstration. On May 5, plainclothes security officers detained participants in a government-sanctioned demonstration, including two observers from the Belarusian Helsinki Committee.

On July 28, Anatoliy Fyodorov, the leader of the Mogilev regional chapter of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front was fined heavily for organizing an unauthorized demonstration on July 15. The demonstration was held to protest the Government's expulsion, in violation of the Vienna Diplomatic Convention, of foreign ambassadors from their official residences located near the presidential compound in Drozdy outside of Minsk. Fyodorov later commented that it is virtually impossible to get approval from local officials in Mogilev to hold opposition rallies or demonstrations.

On August 30, a Minsk court fined Valeriy Shchukin, a member of the Charter 97 human rights organization and the 13th Supreme Soviet, for holding a demonstration during the official national day celebrations on July 3.

On November 5, following a decision to divert a protest march from a government preapproved demonstration site to presidential administration offices in Minsk, security officers briefly detained at least 15 independent labor activists. Those arrested either were released with warnings, fined, or sentenced to minor (between 6 and 15 days) prison terms (see Section 6.b.).

In an attempt to prevent antigovernment demonstrations near the presidential administrative office building, the Minsk City Executive Committee issued in early December a directive banning mass meetings in October Square located in downtown Minsk. Although the decree did not go into effect until December 8, opposition figures and human rights activists were denied permission to hold a rally on December 6 in commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When they attempted to proceed with the rally anyway, police detained a number of protesters, including BNF deputy chairman Yuri Khadyka and Charter '97 deputy director Ludmilla Gryaznova. Six protesters were sentenced to between 3 and 10 days in prison.

On December 25, government security officers arrested approximately 10 persons, including journalists, at an unsanctioned demonstration against closer integration with Russia. On December 28, four of those detained were sentenced each to 5 days in prison, two were fined, and one was given an official warning (see Sections 1.d. and 2.a.).

The Constitution provides for freedom of association; however, the Government does not respect this right in practice. According to members of parties in opposition to the President, authorities frequently deny permission to opposition groups to meet in public buildings. Employees at state-run enterprises are discouraged from joining independent trade unions, and the Ministry of Justice long denied registration to the Congress of Independent Trade Unions (see Section 6.a.). Only in late 1997 did the Government, under considerable international pressure, order the Ministry of Justice to register the Congress of Independent Trade Unions and lift the 1995 ban on one of its constituents, the Free Trade Union (see Section 6.a.). The Government regularly harasses members and supporters of opposition parties, and confiscates their leaflets and publications. Government officials warned alumni of foreign-sponsored education programs against continued affiliation with their program's sponsoring agency or embassy.

There are 28 registered national political parties and 43 registered trade unions (9 of which label themselves as free, independent, and democratic), and 2,200 registered social organizations. A 1995 decision by the Ministry of Justice required existing public associations to reregister. During the reregistration process, the Ministry sometimes found cause to deny reregistration to NGO's. According to the Belarus League for Human Rights, some government officials admitted that the process was illegal, and that they therefore had allowed some groups to continue operating under their original registration. However, since the 1995 decision, it has become more difficult in general for NGO's to obtain registration. On August 14, the Ministry of Justice upheld its prior decision to deny registration to the Belarusian Association of Prisoners of the Lukashenko Regime, a new opposition-affiliated organization.

The Government attempted to limit severely the activities of NGO's, primarily through intrusive and questionable tax audits, denial of registration, limited access to rental properties and intimidation of employees. Although it was not authorized to do so under the Law on Public Associations rewritten in 1997, the Security Council announced audits against the Belarusian Soros Foundation (BSF), as well as other NGO's. The BSF was forced to cease its operations as a result of the Government's campaign of harassment. On February 11, the Minsk Regional Economic Court reduced from \$3 million to \$80,000 a 1997 fine against BSF for alleged tax and currency violations but upheld the confiscation of the BSF's office equipment and property. Deputy Presidential Administration Head Ivan Pashkevich announced in November that all NGO's would have to reregister with the Government during early 1999.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice. The Government enforces a 1995 Cabinet of Ministers decree that controls religious workers, in an attempt to protect orthodoxy and prevent the growth of evangelical religions. Foreigners generally are prohibited from preaching or heading churches, at least with respect to what the Government views as "non-traditional" religions, which include Protestant faiths. In September 1997, a Belarusian Baptist pastor was arrested for allowing a foreigner to lead a prayer group under the pastor's auspices. The pastor subsequently was released. A 1997 directive by the Council of Ministers prohibits teaching religion at youth camps.

Citizens are not prohibited from proselytizing, but foreign missionaries may not engage in religious activities outside the institutions that invited them. Only religious organizations

already registered in the country may invite foreign clergy. Foreign religious workers who do not register with the authorities, or who fail to get approval for religious activities - often a difficult bureaucratic process - have been expelled from the country. The Government and the President encourage a greater role for the Orthodox Church, largely as part of an overall strategy to strengthen Slavic unity in the region. However, the effort has not slowed the growth of Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church has experienced difficulty getting permission from authorities to bring in a sufficient number of outside religious workers to make up for a shortage of native clergy. According to an independent Russian press report, President Lukashenko told Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Aleksey II, during a visit by the Patriarch to Minsk in late September, that Christian values should become "the state ideology of Belarus."

During a press conference held at a seminar in Minsk in early December, Vyacheslav Savitskiy, an official of the State Committee on Religious and Ethnic Affairs, emphasized the existence of "destructive sects" in the country. According to Savitskiy, the Government had denied the registration requests of 11 such "sects." For example, authorities consistently have denied the repeated registration attempts of the Belarus Orthodox Autocephalous Church.

The President granted the Orthodox Church special financial advantages, which other denominations do not enjoy, and has declared the preservation and development of Orthodox Christianity a "moral necessity." Bishops must receive permission from the State Committee on Religious Affairs before transferring a foreign priest to another parish.

Restitution of religious property remained limited during the year. A key obstacle is the lack of a legal basis for restitution of property that was seized during the Soviet era and the Nazi occupation. The few returns of property to religious communities have been on an individual and inconsistent basis, and local government authorities in general are reluctant to cooperate on the issue. Over the past several years, the Jewish community has lobbied the Government successfully to return three synagogues in Minsk and several buildings outside the capital. In August following extensive restoration, the Catholic community reconsecrated a church in Pruzhany that had been shut down by Soviet authorities following World War II. The consecration ceremony was led by the church's former priest who had spent 10 years in prison in Siberia during the Soviet period.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

According to the Constitution, citizens are free to travel within the country and to live and work where they wish. All adults are issued internal passports, which serve as primary identity documents and are required for travel, permanent housing, and hotel registration.

The right to choose one's place of residence, although provided by law, remains restricted in practice. Despite its formal abolition by the Soviet Government in October 1991, the "propiska" (pass) system survives in the country. All citizens are required to register their places of residence and may not change them without official permission. The authorities no longer explicitly limit the number of residence permits in Minsk and the five other regional centers of Brest, Grodno, Mogilev, Vitebsk, and Gomel. However, in order to register a citizen must have employment in the city already; but to be legally employed in the city, one must be registered already. These circular and conflicting requirements limit citizens' freedom of movement.

Government regulations on entry and exit require citizens who wish to travel abroad to receive first an overseas passport and a "global" exit visa, valid for between 1 and 5 years. Once a traveler has these documents, the law does not restrict travel. In November authorities denied Pavel Sheremet, a local television correspondent for a Russian network given a 2-year suspended sentence in January for alleged illegal border crossing (see Sections 1.e. and 2.a.), permission to leave the country to receive an award from the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Following the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet in 1996, the Government took measures aimed at limiting the travel of opposition politicians who refused to submit to the legislature created by the November 1996 referendum. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in December 1996 that those Parliamentarians who did not join the new legislature could no longer travel on their diplomatic passports, despite the fact that these individuals had been assured that they would retain their status as deputies until their terms of office expired. Although the diplomatic passports were not confiscated, the border guards reportedly had a blacklist of opposition members who were to be denied exit from the country if they used a diplomatic passport. Subsequent to the January 1997 refusal by border guards to allow former Supreme Soviet Chairman Stanislav Shushkevich and Parliamentary Deputy Anatoly Lebedko to travel abroad on their diplomatic passports, a number of members of the dissolved Parliament have acquired regular passports and have been allowed to travel abroad.

According to official data, the State did not deny any citizen permission to emigrate. However, legislation restricting emigration by those with access to "state secrets" remained in effect, and any citizen involved in a criminal investigation was also ineligible to emigrate. Prospective emigrants who have been refused the right to emigrate may appeal to the courts.

The Constitution gives aliens and stateless persons the same rights as citizens, except in cases established by law, international agreement, or the Constitution. The Constitution also allows the State to grant refugee status to persons who were being persecuted in other states for their political and religious convictions, or because of nationality. The Government does not have a law on first asylum, nor has it signed readmission agreements with any of its neighboring states.

The Government cooperates with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. In May 1997, the Government implemented for the first time the 1995 Law on Refugees, granting refugee status to a group of Afghans. As of December, the Government had granted official refugee status to 64 persons (mostly Afghans and Ethiopians who have lived in the country since prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union). Since its formation in early 1997 from the State Migration Service, the Committee on Migration within the Ministry of Labor officially has turned down four requests for refugee status.

Based on information from government agencies, the UNHCR estimates that there could be up to 35,000 potential refugees and 200,000 illegal aliens in the country. However, the UNHCR acknowledges that these numbers appear to overestimate refugees and aliens. The number of illegal aliens probably does not exceed 100,000. Some refugees report difficulty registering with local authorities, and continued

delay in establishing a comprehensive asylum and refugee policy has made the lives of some of these individuals difficult. The UNHCR is not aware of any cases of bona fide refugees forced to return to countries in which they feared persecution.

Section 3. Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The Government severely limits the right of citizens to change their government. From November 9-24, 1996, the executive branch conducted a controversial constitutional referendum that was neither free nor fair, according to credible international observers, including representatives of the European Union and the OSCE. Many Members of Parliament and of the Constitutional Court actively opposed President Lukashenko's proposals for both substantive and procedural reasons. The justices asserted that the referendum gave Lukashenko control over the legislative and judicial branches of government and extended his term in office. They also criticized it on procedural grounds as an unconstitutional means to eliminate the Constitution's checks and balances and grant the President virtually unlimited powers.

In the period leading up to the referendum, opponents of President Lukashenko's proposals were denied access to the media, election officials failed to record the names of early voters, and no texts of the proposed Constitution were made available to voters until several days after citizens began voting. As a result of these irregularities, the head of the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced prior to the event that he would not be able to certify the results of the referendum. President Lukashenko promptly fired him, although the Constitution in force at the time gave the Parliament the exclusive authority to appoint and dismiss the CEC Chairman. Members of the security forces forcibly removed the head of the CEC from his office. Shortly thereafter, the Prime Minister resigned in protest of President Lukashenko's refusal to cancel the widely criticized referendum.

Most members of the international community chose not to send election monitors to observe the referendum because of the illegitimacy of the entire process. Human rights organizations, including the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Human Rights Watch, protested the conduct of the referendum.

The Constitutional Court formally ruled that the issues posed in President Lukashenko's referendum could not be decided legally through a referendum, and that its results should be purely advisory, consistent with the Constitution. However, after winning the referendum — according to the Government's own official count — President Lukashenko began to implement it immediately. The new Constitution established a bicameral legislature. Its 110-member lower house was formed out of the membership of the existing Supreme Soviet; deputies volunteered or were lured by promises of free housing and other benefits to serve in the new body. The 64-member upper house was created by a combination of presidential appointments and elections by the 6 regional or oblast councils and the Minsk City Council. The transition left 86 electoral districts unrepresented because the new Constitution reduced the number of representatives, and also because a full Supreme Soviet had never been seated, largely due to the executive branch's intervention in the 1995 elections.

Despite consultative assistance provided by the OSCE's Advisory and Monitoring Group in Minsk, President Lukashenko's National Assembly passed in December seriously flawed legislation on local elections, next scheduled to be held on April 4, 1999. A late modification to Article 33 of

the law, inserted at the insistence of the President, effectively bars many opposition candidates from running in local elections by prohibiting the participation of individuals who have been fined administratively by government authorities. There are no legal restrictions on women's participation in politics and government. However, with the exception of the judiciary, social barriers to women in politics are strong, and men hold virtually all leadership positions. In the acting legislature, women hold 19 of 110 seats in the lower house and 5 of 64 in the upper house. The Deputy Chair of the upper house is a woman. The Minister of Social Security is the only female member of the Council of Ministers.

Section 4. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The country's poor human rights record drew the attention of many international human rights organizations, and there are several local human rights groups active in the country. However, members of local human rights organizations reported that the Government hindered their attempts to investigate alleged human rights violations. The Government monitored their correspondence and telephone conversations. The Government also attempted to limit severely the activities of NGO's through denial of registration, questionable tax audits, and other means (see Section 2.b.). Human rights monitors of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee were briefly detained occasionally while observing demonstrations during the year.

In general, the Government has been willing to discuss human rights with international NGO's whose members have been allowed to visit the country. Following a 3-day fact finding trip in August, the director of the international Helsinki Federation for Human Rights sent an open letter to the Foreign Ministry criticizing human rights violations in the country. In particular, the letter criticized the judiciary's refusal to investigate violence against journalists, the persecution of university students for political activities, and unreasonably high fines for participants in unsanctioned public protests.

On February 27, after protracted negotiations, the Government finally approved the opening in Minsk of the OSCE's Advisory and Monitoring Group office. The OSCE's presence in Minsk provides a potentially important forum for dialog on human rights issues.

In February following the trial of Youth Front members Shidlovskiy and Labkovich, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for their release and condemning, among other things, arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and threats of violence against journalists.

On August 19, the United Nations Human Rights Commission's Subcommission for the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities adopted a resolution expressing concern at the climate of "fear and intolerance," the concentration of legislative power in the executive branch, and the existence of a weak judiciary in Belarus. The resolution called upon the Government to lift restrictions on freedom of expression and to protect the integrity and rights of journalists and human rights defenders by allowing them to investigate, publish, and report on abuses of power and violations of human rights.

Section 5. Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Constitution states that all citizens are equal before the law and have the right, without any discrimination, to equal protection of their rights and legitimate interests. However, the Constitution does not specifically prohibit discrimination based on factors such as race, sex, or religion. The Law on Citizenship, passed by the Parliament, grants citizenship to any person living permanently on the territory of the country as of October 19, 1991. Those who arrived in the country after that date and wish to become citizens are required to submit an application for citizenship, take an oath to support the Constitution, have a legal source of income, and have lived in the country for 7 years.

Women. Although statistics are not available, domestic violence including spousal abuse against women is a significant problem, according to women's groups. There are laws prohibiting spousal abuse. Knowledgeable sources indicate that police generally are not hesitant to enforce the laws against domestic violence and that the courts are not reluctant to impose sentences. The main problem, according to women's groups, is a general reluctance among women to report incidents of domestic violence. Violence against women was not the subject of extensive media coverage, marches, or demonstrations during the year.

Although government authorities and local human rights observers report that prostitution is not a significant problem within the country, there is much anecdotal evidence that young women seeking to work or travel abroad are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, very few women are deported back to Belarus for engaging in prostitution, and there are no local organized crime groups involved in the trafficking of women. However, the Ministry of Internal Affairs acknowledges that Russian criminal organizations may try actively to recruit and lure Belarusian women into serving as prostitutes in Western Europe and the Middle East.

Sexual harassment is reportedly widespread, but there are not any specific laws to deal with the problem other than laws against physical assault.

The law requires equal wages for equal work; however, such is not always the case in practice. Women have significantly fewer opportunities for advancement to the upper ranks of management. Women report that managers frequently take into consideration whether a woman has children when considering potential job opportunities.

The level of education of women is higher than that of men. Women make up 58 percent of workers with a higher education and 66 percent of workers with a specialized secondary education. Despite their higher rate of education, women are employed in lower paying fields, such as health care and education. In these sectors, between two-thirds and three-fourths of employees (mostly women) live beneath the official poverty level. Women are equal to men before the law with regard to property ownership and inheritance. There are active women's groups, most of them focusing on issues such as child welfare, environmental concerns (in the aftermath of Chernobyl), and the preservation of the family. A private university in Minsk established the country's first gender studies faculty during 1997.

Children. The Government is committed to children's welfare and health, particularly as related to the consequences of the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, and, with the help of foreign donors, gives them special attention. By law everyone is

entitled to health care, including children. There does not appear to be any difference in the treatment of girls and boys. Children begin school at the age of 6 and are required to complete 9 years, although the Government makes 11 years of education available at no cost, and is in the process of developing a 12-year education program. Higher education also is available at no cost on a competitive basis. Families with children receive token government benefits. A World Bank study has reported that the majority of those living in poverty are families with multiple children or single mothers. There does not appear to be a societal pattern of abuse of children.

People With Disabilities. A 1992 law mandated accessibility to transport, residences, businesses, and offices for the disabled; however, facilities, including transport and office buildings, often are not accessible to the disabled. The country's difficult financial condition makes it especially difficult for local governments to budget sufficient funds to implement the 1992 law. The central Government continues to provide some minimal subsidies to the disabled. However, high inflation and the sharp decline in the value of the Belarusian ruble greatly reduced the real worth of these limited subsidies.

Religious Minorities. Societal anti-Semitism exists but usually is not manifested openly. Senior government officials, including the President, and the state media have sometimes used coded anti-Semitic language in their attacks on perceived opponents. At the time of former National Bank Chairwoman Tamara Vinnikova's arrest in 1997 for alleged malfeasance (see Section 1.d.), the state media made insinuations about a previous trip to Israel. In February, vandals smashed 35 tombs and monuments in a Jewish cemetery in the town of Rechitsa in the Gomel region. A similar incident, in which over 50 tombs were vandalized, took place in the same cemetery during 1997. Local officials reportedly have failed to come up with any leads in these cases. In a television interview given in Moscow during December, in which he sought to criticize Russian financier and Executive Secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States Boris Berezovsky, President Lukashenko stated that Berezovsky's activities, "might result in Jewish pogroms in Russia." Lukashenko also remarked that, "the main anti-Semites in Russia are representatives of the Jewish population."

Section 6. Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The Constitution upholds the right of workers, except state security and military personnel, to form and join independent unions on a voluntary basis and to carry out actions in defense of worker rights, including the right to strike. However, these rights are not recognized in practice. The independent trade union movement is still in its infancy. The Belarusian Free Trade Union (BFTU) was established in 1991 and registered in 1992. Following the 1995 Minsk metro workers' strike, the President issued a decree suspending its activities. In 1996 the BFTU leaders formed a new umbrella organization, the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU), which encompasses four leading independent unions and currently has approximately 18,500 members.

The Government has taken measures to suppress independent trade unions. For example, members of independent unions have been arrested for distributing union literature, had material confiscated at the borders (see Section 2.a.), have been denied access to work sites, have been subjected to excessive fines, and have been pressured by their managers and state security services to resign from their jobs because of

trade union activities. Despite the repeal by the Government of its illegal ban on the BFTU and the Ministry of Justice registration of the BCDTU during December 1997, government authorities have continued to threaten and harass independent union members. State managers at the Mogilev Trolley Bus Directorate refused to allow Victor Tarnovskiy, the chairman of a local branch of the independent Democratic Trade Union of Transport Workers, to fulfill his union leadership responsibilities. The Directorate terminated Tarnovskiy's employment in April.

The Government continues to discourage employees at state-run enterprises from joining independent trade unions. Several workers at the Mogilev automobile plant were threatened during April that their employment contracts would be terminated unless they resigned their membership in the BFTU. Mogilev city officials also repeatedly have refused permission to hold union demonstrations. Presidential decree number 639, "On Measures Aimed at Improvement of Cooperation of State Governing Bodies and Trade Unions," issued in December 1997, assigned to the Council of Ministers and the official Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) the task of drafting new legislation regarding collective bargaining, union rights, and representation. Although the FTUB-drafted "Concept of the State Policy Towards Trade Unions," has not yet been adopted, independent unions leaders fear that it potentially would lock them out of the collective bargaining process by limiting participation based on the size of union membership.

The FTUB, formerly the Belarusian branch of the Soviet Union's All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, consists of approximately 4.4 million workers (including retirees) and is by far the largest trade union organization. According to official union federation figures 92 percent of the workforce is unionized. Although unwilling in the past to challenge the regime seriously, the FTUB's leadership during the year was far more vocal in its criticisms of the policies of the Lukashenko regime. In retaliation FTUB officials reportedly have been subjected to threats and harassment from the Government. However, independent labor leaders maintain that most FTUB officials do not promote effectively worker rights. Independent labor leaders also believe that the official trade unions' continued control over social welfare functions usually performed by the State (such as pension funds) is an obstacle to the growth of true, independent trade unions.

Tight control by the Government over public demonstrations (see Sections 1.d. and 2.b.) makes it difficult for unions to strike or hold public rallies to further their objectives. Approximately 15 independent trade union activists, including BFTU chairwoman Maria Aliyeva and editor of the BFTU bulletin, Worker, Viktor Ivashkevich, were detained by police on November 5 following an antigovernment labor demonstration (see Section 2.b.). Although the BFTU had received government approval to hold a demonstration outside of the Minsk Tractor Factory, protest leaders were arrested after they decided to march on presidential administration offices to present a petition calling for higher wages and union access to the official media. A Minsk city court subsequently released with official warnings, fined, or sentenced to between 6 and 15 days in prison those who were arrested. Following an extensive antiunion campaign conducted by the state media, the FTUB-affiliated Automobile and Agricultural Equipment Manufacturing Union called off at the last moment a demonstration against falling living standards that it had planned to hold in Minsk on December 2. There were credible reports that state sector workers were threatened with retaliatory punishments

if they proceeded with the demonstration. Unions may affiliate freely with international bodies.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Legislation dating from the Soviet era provides for the right to organize and bargain collectively. Since the economy is still largely in the hands of the State, unions usually seek political redress for their economic problems. Workers and independent unions have recourse to the court system. According to a poll conducted by the Ministry of Labor's Labor Research Institute in January, most industrial workers believe that the terms of their employment are governed by collective bargaining agreements. However, only 17 percent of the workers polled thought that collective bargaining agreements are executed as stipulated. There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The Constitution prohibits forced labor, except in cases when the work or service to be performed is fixed by a court's decision or in accordance with the Law on the State of Emergency and Martial Law. The Constitutional provision prohibiting forced or bonded labor applies to all citizens, although its application to children is not specified. With the possible exception of juvenile prisoners, forced labor is not known to occur.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The law establishes 16 as the minimum age for employment. With the written consent of one parent (or legal guardian), a child of 14 years may conclude a labor contract. The Prosecutor General's office reportedly enforces this law effectively. The constitutional provision prohibiting forced or bonded labor applies to all citizens, although its application to children is not specified (see Section 6.c.).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

On October 1, in a failed attempt to maintain the real value of wages, the Council of Ministers raised the monthly minimum wage from \$4 (250,000 rubles) to \$6 (350,000 rubles). On December 30, the Council of Ministers announced that the monthly minimum wage would be "raised" from 350,000 rubles to 500,000 rubles, which was then worth only \$2 at the official rate of exchange. The minimum wage does not

provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. However, the minimum wage is used by the Government mostly as a statistical measuring tool, and the official monthly poverty line on December 30 — approximately \$16.50 (4,180,267 rubles) — was actually much higher. According to one estimate, the average monthly wage at the end of the year stood at approximately \$33 (8,527,189 rubles), a drop of 170 percent in real terms since January. Agricultural workers are paid approximately 39 percent less than the average monthly wage. Sharp devaluation of the ruble during the year made it even more difficult for the average worker to earn a decent living. Wage arrears in the state sector were also a growing problem and totaled over 9 percent of the Government's wage fund in October. Collective and state farms accounted for over 84 percent of the arrearages. According to the president of the FTUB, at least 12 percent of state industrial enterprises pay workers late, and less than 50 percent of agricultural workers receive their wages on time.

The Constitution and Labor Code set a limit of 40 hours of work per week and provide for at least one 24-hour rest period per week. Because of the country's difficult economic situation, an increasing number of workers find themselves working considerably less than 40 hours per week. Factories often require workers to take unpaid furloughs due to shortages of raw materials and energy and lack of demand for factory output.

The law establishes minimum conditions for workplace safety and worker health; however, these standards often are ignored. Workers at many heavy machinery plants do not wear even minimal safety gear, such as gloves, hard hats, or welding glasses. A State Labor Inspectorate exists, but does not have the authority to enforce compliance, and violations often are ignored. According to official data, 294 people died and 692 were injured in workplace accidents during the year. The high accident rate is due to lack of protective clothing, shoes, and equipment, non-observance of temperature regulations, and the use of outdated machinery. There is no provision in the law that allows workers to remove themselves from dangerous work situations without risking loss of their jobs.

Source: DOSFAN home page, an official U.S. Government source for information on the WWW.

Belarus Focus of Helsinki Commission Hearing

By Orest Deychakiwsky

At an April 27 Commission on Security and Cooperation (Helsinki Commission) hearing titled "Belarus: Back in the USSR?", witnesses focused attention on the erosion of human rights and assault on the rule of law stemming from President Alexander Lukashenka's extension of his personal powers, and the international community's response. The hearing was attended by Commissioner Reps. Chairman Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ) and Steny H. Hoyer (D-MD) and Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS).

Chairman Smith opened the hearing by recalling the anniversary of Chernobyl, and its devastating legacy for Belarus, noting also that Lukashenka's amassing of power in the illegitimate 1996 referendum has been described as a "legal Chernobyl." He also cited the efforts of the international community, including the Helsinki Commission, to encourage

greater compliance by the Belarusian government with Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) norms, principles and commitments in the area of human rights and democracy. Rep. Smith also called upon the Belarusian authorities to release from prison former prime minister Mikhail Chyhir, who is a presidential candidate in the opposition-organized May 16 presidential elections and "...begin a constructive dialogue with the opposition to address the current constitutional impasse created by the illegitimate 1996 referendum."

Sen. Brownback, in his opening remarks, stressed that it's not the West isolating Belarus, but Belarus isolating itself by its transgressing fundamental principles presented in the Helsinki Final Act and other international human rights agreements.

Testifying at the hearing were Ross Wilson, Principal Deputy to the Ambassador at Large and Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for the New Independent States, Ambassador Hans-Georg Wieck, Head of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Miensk, Arkady Cherepansky, Charge D'Affaires at the Belarusian Embassy, Andrei Sannikov,

former Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus and International Coordinator for Charter 97, Rachel Denber from Human Rights Watch and Catherine A. Fitzpatrick of the International League for Human Rights.

In his testimony, Ross Wilson of the State Department stated that President Lukashenka has “destroyed the constitutional balance of power; disbanded the Supreme Soviet, installed a rubber stamp legislature, and subordinated the judiciary... clamped down on dissent and independent political organizations... rejected economic reform, worked to keep the old Soviet economic machine in his country alive...” Nevertheless, he stressed that we must not ignore Belarus and must continue to work with the OSCE, EU and other democratic partners to push for change. He also described the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly’s continued recognition of Belarus’ 13th Supreme Soviet which Lukashenka abolished in 1996 as a “...burr in the side of President Lukashenka.” Mr. Wilson characterized our assistance program in Belarus as active and focusing on supporting democratic change, with no assistance going to the Government. “Belarus had promise,” he noted, “in years following independence, that promise reflected the democratic and European aspirations of the Belarusian people, who have seen such suffering in this century. We want to see it live up to that promise.”

Rep. Steny Hoyer echoed Mr. Wilson’s observation about “not forgetting the Belarusian people” and emphasized that “...we keep in mind — as we are involved in Kosovo and Serbia, that our argument is not with the Serbian people or with the people of Belarus, but with the leadership and the dictatorship that’s being imposed upon them.”

Mr. Wilson observed that progress to implement a union between Belarus and Russia has been slow and that “Belarusians are not as supportive of the idea of Belarusian-Russian unity as some might pretend.” He also noted that Belarus’ relations with Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania are complicated, and that governments of all three have shared their concerns with the U.S., as well as directly to the Belarusian leadership.

Ambassador Hans-Georg Wieck, Head of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) in Belarus outlined the group’s efforts over the past year and the OSCE’s strategy there. Wieck noted a willingness and readiness not only among the opposition, but even within the Belarusian government itself, to move towards democratic structures. The objective of the AMG is to “further the peaceful solution to the existing conflict within the country, and to introduce the principles, as well as the practice, of peaceful conflict resolution into the political climate of the country”, pursuing these objectives through programs to further democratic legislation and the rule of law, and human rights monitoring and education. While acknowledging that a great deal needs to be done to further these objectives, Ambassador Wieck argued for the West’s continued constructive engagement with Belarus, stating: “The renovation, the innovation, the modernization of industrial potential of Belarus cannot be achieved with Russia, it can be achieved only with the West.” Ambassador Wieck noted that there were a number of difficulties in working with a government which does not follow the rule of law. “I will work to have free and fair parliamentary elections in 2000, but opposition parties must have access to the media,” he said.

Arkady Cherepanky, Charge d’Affaires at the Belarusian Embassy in Washington defended his government’s human rights record, arguing that there has been progress in comparison to the Soviet era and that “the only substantive

aspect in the current discussion should be the pace of democratic and political transformation in the country.” He reiterated his government’s position that any dialogue between the government and opposition should proceed on the basis of Lukashenka’s 1996 constitution, considered illegitimate by most of the international community. Commissioners Smith and Hoyer challenged Mr. Cherepanky on his perspective on the pace of reform, contending that the issue is not only the pace of transformation, but the direction of the pace, namely, that it is moving in a direction away from democracy.

The Commissioners queried Mr. Cherepanky as to whether there would be a massive crackdown against opposition political parties if they carry out elections on May 16. Mr. Cherepanky assured the Commissioners that no massive crackdown would occur, “though those elections will be in violation of existing law. The only punishment meted out will be according to the current laws of the government. We are actually working with international experts on a new criminal code.” Rep. Hoyer then pointed out that “if your existing laws are not compliant with international standards, it does not rationalize them nor excuse the denial of human rights to your people.” Chairman Smith also emphasized concern about Presidential Decree No. 2, which introduces extensive restrictions on non-governmental activity and mandates re-registration of political parties, NGO’s and trade unions, asserting that “we stand as a Commission very determined to ensure that non-governmental, as well as the opposition party members, be free to express themselves without hindrance, without having the government retaliate and do some of the awful things that have happened in the past.”

In addition to criticizing the Belarusian government’s violations of OSCE human rights commitments and Lukashenka’s illegal concentration of power in his hands, Amb. Sannikov, Ms. Fitzpatrick and Ms. Denber, while recognizing the challenges that OSCE’s AMG encounters in dealing with the Belarusian government, criticized its work. Ambassador Sannikov urged support for Belarusian independence, questioning the legitimacy of Lukashenka’s efforts to realize a Belarusian-Russian union, as the will of the people cannot be expressed freely in Belarus. Amb. Sannikov also stressed that the Belarusian democratic opposition, of which he is a leading member, is “unanimous in its views that President Lukashenka’s term of office expires on July 20 1999. International recognition of the legitimacy of President Lukashenka after July 20 will perpetuate the situation of dictatorship in Belarus, and give the authorities a free hand in abusing every human right and basic freedom”. He contended that the authorities have rejected conditions that would be conducive to a serious dialogue between the government and opposition, namely, opposition “access to the mass media and the release of political prisoners and cessation of the harassment and intimidation of the opponents of the regime.” Despite initially welcoming the AMG, “today, unfortunately”, said Mr. Sannikov, “the AMG’s activities in Belarus are seen by many in the democratic opposition as too loyal to the authorities and aimed at the gradual recognition of the unlawful constitution and President Lukashenka after his July 20 term expires.” Amb. Sannikov felt that the AMG funds spent on election training and monitoring “were a waste of the resources of the OSCE participating States. It is wasted in a country that doesn’t have the rule of law.”

Both Mr. Sannikov and Ms. Fitzpatrick called for the return of the U.S. Ambassador to Minsk, arguing that the presence of an American ambassador would help to put pressure on Belarusian authorities to move towards democ-

racy. Ms. Fitzpatrick also called for an aggressive plan of outreach to opposition and civic groups and programs to improve foreign radio broadcasting to Belarus as well as funding of activities to strengthen civil society, including academic exchanges and a major media development fund. She urged the AMG to make public its interventions with the Belarusian government and to note publicly when it was denied access to prisons, and called for future OSCE elections observation to be linked explicitly to the re-registration of NGOs, trade unions, and parties under international standards for freedom of association.

Ms. Denber observed that the conditions prevailing in Belarus have only worsened since the AMG began its work in February 1998, especially the growing impasse between the government and opposition. She argued that the AMG's early reliance on quiet diplomacy resulted in a failure "to make its presence felt among the people who needed it the most" and urged the AMG to focus more attention on cases and "to intervene on behalf of besieged and marginalized institutions and actors in Belarus, NGOs, individuals". Echoing Amb.

Sannikov and Ms. Fitzpatrick, she urged greater transparency in the AMG's work in Belarus. Ms. Denber did note, however, that as of a few months ago, Human Rights Watch began to notice marked improvements in the work of the AMG, especially a greater willingness to intervene on political cases and monitor trials.

A few days after the Commission hearing, US Ambassador Speckhard, who attended the hearing, returned to Belarus for a visit for the first time since last summer, when foreign ambassadors were evicted from their residences in the Drazdy compound by President Lukashenka. While in Belarus, Amb. Speckhard said that the United States regards the May 16 presidential elections in Belarus as a statement of the political will of the Belarusian people, and hoped that the opposition's elections will lead to a constructive dialogue between the government and opposition.

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CSCE Chairman Sees Value in Alternative Presidential Elections in Belarus

Following is a statement by Rep. Christopher H. Smith, Chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, as reported in the Congressional Record on May 25, 1999.

Constitutional Impasse Continues in Belarus

On May 16, the alternative presidential election concluded in Belarus within the time frame envisioned by the legitimate 1994 Constitution. While the opposition Central Election Commission (CEC) concluded that the final results of the voting were invalid because of various violations deriving from the impediments placed by Belarusian authorities, the ballot served as an important barometer of democratic engagement by the citizens of Belarus. In the months leading up to the election, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka had imprisoned one of the two presidential candidates - former Prime Minister Mikhail Chygir - on what were clearly politically motivated charges, arrested hundreds of election officials and volunteers, and instituted administrative proceedings against others. Nevertheless, the authorities were unable to thwart the election in at least one critically important respect - according to the opposition CEC, the voting itself was valid because more than half - or 53 percent of the electorate - participated. When one considers that these were unsanctioned elections that challenged Lukashenka's legitimacy, this is a substantial number of people.

No matter what the imperfections, Mr. Speaker, the opposition's electoral initiative should send a powerful message to Lukashenka. Clearly, an appreciable number of Belarusian citizens are dissatisfied with the profoundly negative political and socio-economic fallout stemming from his dictatorial inclinations and misguided nostalgia for the Soviet past or some misty "Slavic Union." The vote highlights the constitutional and political impasse created by Lukashenka's illegitimate 1996 constitutional referendum, in which he extended his personal power, disbanded the duly elected 13th Supreme Soviet, and created a new legislature and constitutional court subservient to him. Last month, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission), which I chair, held a hearing on the situation in Belarus, with a view towards promoting human rights and democracy there. Testimony from the State Department, OSCE mission in

Belarus, the Belarusian democratic opposition and several human rights NGOs all reaffirmed that Belarus is missing out on what one witness characterized as "the great market democratic revolution that is sweeping Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia" because of Lukashenka's power grab and backsliding on human rights and democracy.

Despite repeated calls from the international community, including the Helsinki Commission, for Lukashenka to cease harassment of the opposition, NGOs and the independent media; allow the opposition access to the electronic media; create the conditions for free and fair elections and strengthen the rule of law, we have failed to see progress in these areas. Indeed, we see more evidence of reversals. Earlier this year, for example, Lukashenka signed a decree which introduces extensive restrictions on non-governmental activity and mandates re-registration - by July 1 - of political parties, NGOs and trade unions. The decree, which among other onerous stipulations requires that organizations acknowledge the results of Lukashenka's illegitimate 1996 referendum, is clearly designed to destroy democratic civil society in Belarus and further consolidate Lukashenka's repressive rule. Moreover, within the last few months, several disturbing incidents have occurred, among them the March arrests of Viktor Gonchar, Chairman of the opposition CEC, and the Chygir imprisonment, as well as the mysterious disappearances of Tamara Vinnikova, former chair of the National Bank of Belarus and, on May 10, Gen Yuri Zakharenko, former Interior Minister and a leading opponent of Lukashenka. Just a few days ago, Lukashenka's government announced that no more foreign priests will be allowed to serve in Belarus, making it extremely difficult for the Roman Catholic Church, which is rebuilding following the travails of the Soviet era, to function.

Mr. Speaker, I strongly urge the Belarusian Government to comply with its freely undertaken commitments under the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent OSCE agreements and to immediately, without preconditions, convene a genuine dialogue with the country's democratic forces and with the long-suffering Belarusian people.

Talbott Meeting with Saŭnikau

Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott met with Andrei Saŭnikau, former deputy foreign minister of Belarus, on April 20, 1999. Following is the text of the statement by James Rubin, State Department spokesman, as released on April 21, 1999.

STATEMENT BY JAMES RUBIN, SPOKESMAN

BELARUS: Deputy Secretary Talbott Meeting with Andrei Sannikov

Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott met yesterday with Andrei Sannikov, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus and international coordinator of Charter 97, a broad-based Belarusian organization promoting human rights, to demonstrate our strong support for those in Belarus struggling to restore democracy, which was derailed by President Lukashenko's illegal 1996 referendum.

They discussed the Russian-Belarusian Union. The Deputy Secretary reiterated the U.S. position that integration among the

New Independent States must reflect the voluntary will of the people expressed through the democratic process, must be mutually beneficial, and must not erect barriers to integration with the wider community of nations. A democratic process does not now exist in Belarus, and that calls into question the legitimacy of efforts there to realize a genuine Russian-Belarusian Union.

They also discussed the upcoming May 16 presidential election called by the 13th Supreme Soviet, a legislature recognized by OSCE member countries and illegally disbanded by President Lukashenko in 1996. The election highlights the constitutional and political impasse that exists in the country and the need for dialogue with the opposition and with the public generally to resolve the impasse.

We call upon the Belarusian government to initiate a dialogue, to establish conditions for free and fair elections, to release presidential candidate former Prime Minister Mikhail Chigir, and to release other political prisoners. Belarus has an opportunity to join the democratic mainstream of Europe, but can do so only on the basis of democracy and respect for fundamental human rights.

OSCE Bucharest Meeting on Belarusian Elections

Following is the text of a June 14 press release by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly on Belarusian elections meeting held in Bucharest on June 11-13.

PRESS RELEASE Copenhagen, 14 June 1999

The initiation of a process of dialogue on democratic elections between personalities from various Belarusian organizations took place from 11-13 June 1999, in Bucharest, under the auspices of a joint effort between the Working Group on Belarus of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE PA) and the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus (OSCE AMG). The participants were drawn from Belarusian political parties, non-governmental organizations and trade unions and were gathered by the parliamentary and governmental sides of the OSCE to investigate common ground for free and fair elections that all political forces in Belarus could participate in and which all could subsequently recognize. "The discussions took place in an sincere atmosphere with a positive spirit", said former Foreign Minister of Romania Adrian Severin (MP-Romania), who is the Head of the OSCE PA ad hoc Working Group on Belarus. "We have started a discussion on common denominators that could bring together a consensus for political participation in democratic elections."

The closed door sessions were held continuously for three days without breaks and touched on a number of issues which divide the Belarusian political arena, however, the OSCE organizers were pleased to note a number of areas of agreement between all participants. Foremost among these was the need for access to the state-controlled media for all political actors in the transitional country. "We have begun a process here," said Ambassador Hans-Georg Wiek, Head of the OSCE AMG. "A very useful dialogue with areas of mutual agreement for many Belarusian political actors has been explored."

"I believe this was a highly successful effort," added Severin, "and we must now begin the next steps to continue the 'Bucharest Process' and to broaden this dialogue." The OSCE PA and the OSCE AMG plan to continue their joint efforts in the near future with the participation of official Belarusian institutions. Three summaries of the discussion reflecting the debates on political parliamentary process, elections and mass media, are being drafted for all participants, in order to prepare for a future round of dialogue. A number of participants circulated various ideas which are also being compiled for consideration as grounds for further progress.

Members of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly ad hoc Working Group and the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group were joined in Bucharest by the Secretary General of the OSCE PA, Mr. Spencer Oliver, and the Rapporteur of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly Political Affairs Committee, Mr. Wolfgang Berhardt.

THOUGHTS and OBSERVATIONS

SHADOW ELECTIONS IN BELARUS

By Jan Maksymiuk

Originally, it seemed like a good idea to hold an alternative presidential poll in Belarus. From a legal point of view, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's term expires on 20 July 1999. The new constitution introduced by the November 1996

referendum extended his term for another two years and authorized him to disband the democratically elected Supreme Soviet. That referendum was conducted and enforced with such flagrant violations of the law and democratic norms that no European organization has recognized its outcome. All European countries, except Russia, recognized the 50 deputies of the Supreme Soviet who have remained loyal to the abolished 1994 basic law as Belarus' legitimate parliament.

Indeed, it was the Supreme Soviet that decided to hold presidential elections on 16 May and to empower the Central Electoral Commission, another body, headed by Viktor

Hanchar, that was democratically and legitimately elected before the 1996 referendum. Highlighting the extraordinary character of these elections, neither of the two candidates was physically present during either the election campaign or the voting. Zyanon Paznyak, who was granted political asylum in the U.S. in 1996, did not make an appearance in Belarus. The other hopeful, Mikhail Chyhir, was jailed by the authorities six weeks before election day on charges of issuing a dubious bank loan in 1994.

As widely expected, the authorities declared the elections illegal and warned the opposition not to "conspire" to depose the legal government. But they seemed to be at a loss about how to respond as the opposition election initiative gained momentum. By mid-April, some 14,000 people had volunteered to take part in regional electoral commissions, most of them from Paznyak's Belarusian Popular Front (BNF). European organizations, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), had reservations about the opposition election initiative. Even before NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia, which shifted European attention away from Belarus to the Balkans, it became clear that the OSCE would not send its observers to the elections, nor would the ballot provide an internationally recognized new president for Belarus.

But the elections nevertheless offered the opportunity of a "vote of no confidence" in Lukashenka and of dispelling the widespread belief that his regime has strong popular support. Owing to the impossibility of setting up stationary polling stations, Mr. Hanchar's commission decided to send pollsters with ballot boxes to voters' homes over the 10 days preceding election day. While the law does not provide for such a method of voting for

the electorate as a whole, it was nonetheless deemed expedient and effective, given the unique character of the elections.

However, heavy criticism of the voting stemmed not from the authorities but from Mr. Paznyak, who argued that the voting procedures were illegal and that the turnout figures had been falsified. Paznyak also accused Hanchar and Chyhir of seeking to implement a Moscow-sponsored plan to replace the "true opposition"—that is, the BNF—with one subservient to the Kremlin. According to Paznyak, Hanchar intended to falsify election results in favor of Chyhir in order to install him as a new opposition leader and eliminate the BNF from Belarus' political scene. Paznyak withdrew his candidacy from the elections on 14 May. While the BNF decided to continue the election initiative, some activists began calling on their regional colleagues to withdraw from the ballot. Hanchar's commission pronounced a somewhat contradictory verdict on 19 May.

The elections were deemed valid with regard to turnout: just over 4 million voters, or 53 percent of the total electorate. But Hanchar cited pressure from the authorities, the absence of conditions for free election campaigning, and Paznyak's "violation of the election law" as reasons for declaring the election as a whole invalid. The commission announced it will organize another presidential poll within three months. In the end, the shadow election initiative, which was intended to weaken the autocratic regime in Belarus has significantly damaged the opposition.

Many oppositionists have already branded the elections "scandalous." First, it is highly probable that the BNF—the most influential opposition group in Belarus—will split and become mired in mutual recriminations. Second, it seems that the efforts of many thousands of

regional election activists—who risked arrest, the loss of their jobs, and other official retributions—have been squandered. It is unlikely that in the near future, the opposition will be able to re-mobilize such a large number of "field operators." Third, Hanchar's political career seems to have ground to a halt. One Belarusian independent newspaper speculated that the "scandalous" outcome of the election was deliberately planned by Hanchar and Supreme Soviet Chairman Syamyon Sharetzki. It claimed that after July 20, 1999, Sharetzki intends to become head of state (in accordance with the provision of the 1994 constitution dealing with the situation in which the country does not have a legitimately elected president) and offer the post of prime minister to Hanchar.

A major flaw in this scenario, however, is how Hanchar and Sharetzki will persuade Lukashenka to make room for them. Moreover, without the support of the BNF, Hanchar may find there is even less room for him in the Belarusian political arena than there was before the election. Finally, the vote has weakened, rather than strengthened, the opposition's position that the authorities should enter a dialogue with the opposition. Lukashenka has been given a powerful and scathing argument to fend off such a dialogue—namely, that oppositionists should agree among themselves first before seeking to talk to him. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 21, 1999)

Jan Maksymuk is the Belarus, Ukraine and Poland specialist on the the staff of RFE/RL Newsline.

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An Opposition Victory in Belarus

By Charles Fenyvesi

Observers in and out of Belarus had thought the presidential election there sponsored by the democratic opposition but declared illegal by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka would fail either because its organizers would give up or because few Belarusians would take part. But in the event, some 15,000 volunteers defied these predictions and collected ballots from four million people—some 53 percent of eligible voters.

These results stunned virtually everyone, especially since one of the two presidential candidates, Zenon Poznyak, had quit the race because of the unconventional voting methods, and the head of the opposition's Central Electoral Commission, Viktor Hanchar, afterwards declared the election "invalid" because of "irregularities." Whether or not the volunteers and more than half of the adult Belarusian population followed all the rules fastidiously crafted by that commission, these results suggest that Belarusians have voted against Lukashenka.

"This is an extraordinary feat," declared Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, director of the New York-based International League for Human Rights and active in Belarusian affairs for many years. "The election should force European leaders to ask themselves: What else should it take to recognize the opposition as the legitimate government?"

Also impressed with the turnout, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe issued a statement on May 18 which said that the involvement of many citizens in the

ballotting "deserve the respect of democratically governed states within the family of all OSCE states." The OSCE also noted that the elections "were not expected to meet OSCE standards" and called for "a meaningful dialogue" between the government and the opposition to create conditions for free parliamentary and presidential elections in the future.

The OSCE envoy there, former Romanian Foreign Minister Adrian Severin, did not mince words in calling the detention of presidential candidate Mikhail Chyhir, a former prime minister, "highly questionable," adding that this action "should be terminated immediately."

But perhaps most important: the vote suggests that the Belarusian people are not nearly as apathetic as some observers have suggested or as supportive of Lukashenka as others have claimed. And this vote may also

mean that the long list of failures by the democratic opposition is now coming to an end: the failure to block the introduction of a strong presidency in the constitution of 1993, the defeat of democratic candidates in the 1994 presidential election, Lukashenka's victory in changing the constitution and dissolving the parliament called the Supreme Soviet, and the fizzling out of the massive street demonstrations held between 1996 and 1998.

However that may be, there is no sign that Lukashenka will respect the results or moderate his disregard for the law and human rights. Even worse, some observers fear that his failure to intimidate people by threats may lead him and his minions to adopt tougher measures. That possibility has been suggested by the recent "disappearance" of two well-known public figures, the imprisonment of Chyhir, the beating up of several opposition leaders, and the

arrest of several hundred activists for organizing the election.

Moreover, these election results may lead to some rethinking by the international community. Before the vote, Ambassador Hans-Georg Wicke - the head of the OSCE's permanent mission in Minsk, the Advisory and Monitoring Group - had counseled against holding the election and called it "invalid." Opposition leaders did not appreciate his attitude. Stubbornly, they insisted on making what Andrey Sannikau, former deputy foreign minister, had characterized as "a salient ideological point": Lukashenka's constitution and parliament are illegal, and for democracy to function, the status quo ante should be restored. (RFE/RL Watchlist, Vol. 1, No. 19, May 20, 1999)

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A Tragedy in Miensk

By David R. Marples

A Sunday afternoon at the end of May in the city of Miensk (population 1.7 million) in warm sunshine and a temperature of 28°C. On the Mašeraŭ (Masherau) Prospect young people were gathering. The authorities had organized a beer and rock concert. As I wandered by, stalls were being set up and some youngsters were already beginning to sample the free beer. I walked to the Niamiha (Nemiga) metro station some 50 meters away and back to the city center. On three sides of the concert gathering were churches, the most prominent being the twin-steepled Orthodox cathedral up on the hill.

The concert feature was to be the Moscow rock group Mango Mango, who were scheduled to play in the evening. Just after 8:30pm, they started to tune up their instruments and a few minutes later began their first song before the swaying throng of about 2,500. About two kilometers away I was sitting down to dinner with friends when we noticed the sky had begun to darken. More than darken. It was black. And then the heavens opened. From a covered balcony we watched a howling wind accompanied by torrential rain, hail, and dramatic bolts of lightning. It was spectacular, violent, and short.

On the Mašeraŭ Prospect, Mango Mango had just commenced their second song. There was no shelter. The youngsters ran for the Niamiha metro station, in their hundreds. The station is also a narrow

underground pedway across the busy six-lane road. Three militia men were there to keep order. According to eyewitnesses, girls wearing high heels slipped on the steps leading down to the metro station. Those behind piled over them. Some others, the worse for drink, thought it was a game and flung themselves on the backs of those who had fallen. Those who fell could not get up because of the pressure of people coming from behind.

The next 10 minutes were a scene from hell. The militiamen were simply trampled. At least two metros arrived and unloaded their passengers into the melee. Down the steps and into the dank grey passage bodies were piled three or four high. Those at the top were moving; those at the bottom were still. When the emergency teams arrived, they simply loaded the bodies onto trucks from the top downward. Fifty-four were already dead, forty-four of them teenaged girls and two militiamen. Over 150 were hospitalized, many of them in critical condition. Parents alerted to the disaster began to gather at the entrance to hospitals, frantic to know whether their children were alive.

Belarusian authorities declared two days of mourning. The state TV interspersed dirges by a choir with news bulletins. A three-car cavalcade hurtled down the main Skaryna avenue on May 31 and President Alyaksandr Łukašenka arrived at the metro station. Ashen-faced he declared that no one should apportion blame for such a tragedy. Alcohol was not the problem. This was a time for grieving. He placed a flower

on the steps of the entrance where all the bodies had been piled hours before.

But the ramifications soon began in this poor country torn by political strife and economic decline. Opposition politicians wanted to know why young teenagers were given free beer early on a hot day. And clearly, they said, the concert had been authorized by the presidential administration. The story spread that the tragedy was a sign of God's displeasure at such activities. Hadn't the concert taken place between three churches?

Others said that the death toll had been much higher than 54, that the concert goers were all drunk and the authorities wished to conceal the higher figure. Łukašenka, forgetting his earlier remarks, responded by declaring that such accidents happened when there was a lack of order in society. In a city swarming with militia, and in which people are detained regularly for infringements as minor as making derogatory comments about the president, this was an astonishing comment.

The next morning, like many others, I felt drawn to visit the Niamiha station. I couldn't imagine being trapped in there, suffocated as one wave of bodies poured over another. There were flowers on the railings and on the steps. A small crowd had gathered near the entrance. Some people had lit candles to commemorate the young lives so suddenly and inexplicably extinguished. On a lower step, a young girl sat oblivious to all, a flower in her hand.

One could only reflect on the fragility of life here. Ten kilometers to the north is Kurapaty, a mass grave of Stalin's victims.

East of the city is Khatyn, the memorial to the victims of the 1941-45 war which resulted in the loss of a quarter of the republic's population. The Chernobyl

disaster ravaged the lands to the south of Miensk. And now this inexplicable tragedy at the century's end amid the gloom of the Niamiha station.

Dr. David R. Marples is professor of history at the University of Alberta, Canada.

BELARUS' FORUM

Following is a statement by the Coordinating Council of Democratic Forces of Belarus, as released by Charter '97.

The Coordinating Council of Democratic Forces of Belarus released May 10 a statement in regard to mysterious disappearance of General Yuri Zakharenko. Oleg Volchek, chair of the Legal Commission of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party, was appointed to head the committee.

STATEMENT

On Friday, May 7, General Yuri Zakharenko, one of the leaders of the democratic movement of Belarus, ex-minister of Internal Affairs, disappeared under mysterious circumstances. There is every reason to believe that it was a politically motivated, enforced disappearance. It falls perfectly within the KGB plan of suppression of the opposition, which was made public by the free media and the existence of which is vehemently denied by the authorities. The recent events testify not only to the reality of such a plan but also to its current fulfillment.

In February, the international coordinator of Charter '97, former deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus, Andrei Sannikov, was brutally beaten on the street. In March there came an arrest and torture of Viktor Gonchar, chair of the Central Electoral Commission and a former vice-premier. Also in March, Mikhail Chigir, a candidate for the presidency and former prime minister, was arrested and ill-treated in detention.

In April there followed the sudden death of Gennady Karpenko, a member of the Coordinating Council of Democratic

Forces and vice chairman of the Supreme Soviet. In the same April, Tamara Vinnikova, ex-chairperson of the National Bank, mysteriously disappeared after having shared secret data with the media. In April, Arnold Pechersky, the leader of the entrepreneurs' trade union "Solidarity," perished in a car accident. At the end of April, unidentified persons attacked and beat Slavomir Adamovich, journalist and Secretary of the Minsk Electoral Committee. On April 25, dozens of young men were severely beaten by special police units at the peaceful action in Grodno, dedicated to the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster.

Meanwhile, the intimidation campaign against the election participants was already under way. Over 1,500 people were subjected to arrests, fines and warnings from the Prosecutors office and the KGB.

The disappearance of Yuri Zakharenko is another proof of the pre-planned action by the secret services against the political opposition. We demand that the authorities begin an immediate investigation of Yuri Zakharenko's disappearance. We urge the international organizations, parliaments and democratic governments to force the Belarusian authorities to end the terror and harassment of the opposition forces standing up for democratic values by non-violent means.

We appeal to the citizens of Belarus to unite and protect their rights to life and freedom. Only our unity and solidarity may stop the assault of the dictatorship.

The contact phone of the committee on investigation into the disappearance of Yuri Zakharenko:
(+375-17) 263 04-82

Source: Charter '97, May 11, 1999.
e-mail: charter @irex.minsk.by

Belarusian-speaking children considered mentally retarded?

Nataliya Prymakova, a logopedic specialist from Homel, has diagnosed five-year-old Frantsishak Yauseyanka as "linguistically and emotionally underdeveloped" and has ordered him transferred to a kindergarten group of mentally retarded children, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 4 June. The reason for such diagnosis was the fact that Frantsishak, who is being brought up in a Belarusian-speaking family, speaks virtually no Russian. Prymakova, who speaks no Belarusian, tested Frantsishak in Russian when his parents were not present. She concluded that the child's orientation is weak because the boy cannot name some things in Russian.

Volha Tsyareschchanka, Frantsishak's mother, took the boy out of the kindergarten and sent a letter to the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHK), complaining that the kindergarten's management has violated the constitution by denying her son an education in his native language (Russian and Belarusian are the constitutionally recognized official languages in Belarus).

The BHK commented that in Frantsishak's case it is difficult to present his problem to the international community because international human rights activists are not in a position to

understand why the Belarusian government is not interested in promoting the native language of the Belarusians. "According to the BHK's knowledge, there is no Belarusian-language kindergarten in the country," BHK activist Svyatlana Kurs told an RFE/RL correspondent. "The approach to a Belarusian-speaking child is fully dependent on his/her teacher and logopedic specialist. therefore, the child may become morally and emotionally traumatized in his/her early childhood, owing to the uncivilized behavior on the part of an adult or to the Belarusophobia that, unfortunately, is now being enforced."

According to the BHK, since President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, came to power in 1994, some 600 Belarusian-language schools have been transformed into Russian-language ones.

*From the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Report from June 15, 1999
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BELARUS' ECONOMY

Belarus: Entrepreneurial Spirit Dwindling

By Lisa McAdams

Minsk, 24 May 1999 (RFE/RL). An expert on the Belarusian economy says that in the five years since President Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power, Belarus has lost half of its private businesses, or roughly 1,500 entrepreneurial ventures.

Alexander Potupa, a trained economist and former president of a publishing company, was at one time considered to be one of the country's most prominent private businessmen. Speaking to our correspondent in Minsk recently, he called recent setbacks to entrepreneurship "a catastrophe that you can not imagine." He says the country has lost many of its best and brightest businessmen and women, who might have been able to lure future foreign investment to Belarus. Many entrepreneurs have moved their businesses to Germany, Poland and the United States in the West or to Russia in the East.

Today, Potupa is the Deputy Chairman of the Union of Entrepreneurs of Belarus. He says the Union is working hard, against all odds, to try to institute democratic reforms in Belarus and bring back a market economy. He said the Union participated in the development of a Helsinki Commission Report on the violation of human rights – chiefly concerning the violation of property rights in Belarus. He said this year the section would be much larger because, as he put it, "Lukashenka uses lots of violations against businessmen."

"Right now more than 100 legal cases are underway and the charges which are raised against the businessmen are very doubtful and we can consider that now a fight of classes is underway between Lukashenka and the businessmen. In this respect, the perspectives of business development are very vague because now only people who are somehow connected with the President or his administration can do business in Belarus. The situation was bad in the past as well, but now the political and legal environment of reform has been totally destroyed."

Potupa characterizes the current Belarusian business scene as a return to Soviet times, heavily regulated and highly corrupt. To that end,

he notes that the average monthly salary of a Belarusian is under \$30, while the monthly turnover of goods is twice as high. He argues that this means money is being gained and changing hands in Belarus by illegal means.

Potupa said the second factor worthy of note is that the average monthly salary of a state official is around \$60 to \$70. "No official can exist on \$60 to \$70 so officials have to take huge fees to exist. There are no miracles in the world. And today the power structure (the government) is like the militia, it gets business people as a source of income for the authorities. And by that I mean they can come to business units and require or demand any fees for their activities. This situation is especially bad because the authorities have total control of both businessmen and state authorities so, as they are all doing something illegal, the government can come and make demands at any time." Economic analyst Yaroslav Romanchuk adds support to the charge that the current business environment in Belarus serves the government functionary, rather than the entrepreneurial businessman or woman. In a recent analysis for "Belarus Now," Romanchuk said the person with the power is also the one with the power to choose to whom to give privileged credit, property rights or priority credit assistance. And, as he put it, "the more inequality and special conditions for businesses there are, the more corruption and economic criminality results."

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) some six months ago said in its transition report that the Belarusian government was increasing its control over decision-making at the enterprise level. It highlighted a presidential decree giving the state the right to veto enterprise decisions on reorganization, liquidation and managerial changes. The EBRD said another presidential decree added further uncertainty to the investment climate in Belarus by canceling existing tax and customs privileges to foreign investors and giving President Lukashenka direct responsibility for granting such privileges. According to the EBRD, increasing isolation from the international community and growing macroeconomic instability are likely to constrain further inflows of foreign direct investment.

Meanwhile, the World Bank last month announced that it was stepping up its work in Belarus on education and public awareness. World Bank official Ruth Bachmayer said the Bank would arrange workshops and training courses for business people in Belarus, as well as move closer to the Presidential Administration building for closer government contact. The World Bank has long recommended a series of economic steps to the government, including friendly treatment of private businesses as a method to attract much-needed foreign investment.

According to Potupa, the only businesses which manage to survive comparatively well in the current environment are those focusing on small-scale retail trade and the trade of foodstuffs. As Potupa put it, "People always need to eat something and wear something cheap." He said bigger businesses are almost always related to contraband or other illegal activities and said even those that aren't were long ago grabbed up by the government. Potupa said the biggest problem facing Belarus – like other former Soviet countries – is the lack of direct foreign investment. Potupa said the Union of Entrepreneurs of Belarus is fast losing members, many of whom can no longer afford to pay the fees to support its efforts. He said a Congress would be held in Minsk in a few days to address the issue. As for the long-term future, Potupa declined to speculate saying, "All we can try to achieve now is to bar Lukashenka from worsening the situation too quickly."

Observers say that Belarusian authorities often send mixed signals regarding the treatment of private businesses. At times officials have expressed tepid support. But at other times, officials seem hostile. This week, the parliament loyal to Lukashenka voted overwhelmingly to ban what it termed "speculation" and the speaker (Anatole Malafejeu) called for the ban to be included in the criminal code. Lukashenka himself has referred to entrepreneurs as "lousy fleas which should be shaken off."

RFE/RL contacted Belarusian officials in an effort to get their comment on laws and practices affecting private businesses in Belarus. But no response is available.

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BELARUSIANS ABROAD

Harvard Conference Held on Belarus

By David R. Marples

On April 22-23, 1999, a conference was held at Harvard University entitled "The Belarus Factor: Implications for Russia, East-Central Europe and the West." The conference was co-sponsored by the Ukrainian Research Institute (director: Professor Roman Szporluk) and the Davis Center for Russian Studies (director: Professor Timothy Colton), and held at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies on the university campus. It was divided into five panels.

Panel I examined "Regime Consolidation and Prospects for Regime Change." Chaired by James Clem (Harvard University), the speakers were Rainer Lindner (University of Konstanz, Germany); Alexandr Lukashuk (Radio Free Europe, Czech Republic); and Mikl Titma (Stanford University). The commentators were David Marples (University of Alberta, Canada) and Alexandra Goujon (Institut d'Etudes Politiques, France).

Panel II analyzed "The Belarusian Economy: Miracle or Debauchery?" and was chaired by Yoshiko Herrera (Harvard University). The speakers were Patricia Brukoff (US Department of Treasury), Leonid Zlotnikov (Society for the Support of Economic Reform, Belarus), and Margarita Balmaceda (Harvard University and University of Toledo). The

commentator for the panel was Alan Roe (World Bank).

Panel III (the last on April 22) looked at "Russia and Belarus: Mutual Perceptions and Influences" and was chaired by Timothy Colton. The featured speakers were Arkadii Moses (Institute of Europe, Russian Federation), Andrei Sannikov (Charter 97, Belarus), and Vladimir Snapkovskii (Belarusian State University, Minsk, Belarus).

Panels IV and V were held on April 23. The former examined "Belarus and European Security" and was chaired by Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone (Harvard University). Papers were delivered by Astrid Sahn and Kirsten Westphal (Mannheim University) and Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, Germany, respectively, Grigory Perepelitsa (National Institute for Strategic Studies (Ukraine), Algirdas Griusius (Vilnius University, Lithuania), and Agnieszka Magdziak-Miszewska (Institute of Public Affairs, Poland). The commentator for the panel was John Reppert (Harvard University).

The final panel was entitled "The Belarusian Challenge for the West: Strategies for Engagement," and chaired by Lisbeth Tarlow (Harvard University). Papers were presented by Hans-Georg Wiecek (OSCE Mission, Minsk), Sherman Garnett (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), and Elaine Conkievich

(OSCE Secretariat, Vienna, Austria). Hannes Adomeit (Ebenhausen Stiftung, Germany) was the commentator. All the panels were well attended, and elicited lively and prolonged discussions.

In addition to the panels there were two featured speakers. At a conference dinner at the Harvard Faculty Club on 22 April, US Ambassador to Belarus, Daniel Speckhard, outlined current and potential developments in US-Belarusian relations and provided a personal perspective of his relationship with the Belarusian government. On 23 April, at a luncheon at the Sheraton Commander Hotel, Cambridge, Massachusetts, the noted American Belarusian scholar Jan Zaprudnik examined the state of current Western research on Belarus (his speech is reproduced below). Professors Colton and Szporluk, respectively, provided comments to open and close the conference, noting that the conference was the first of its kind in North America and that it represented only the beginning of an effort to comprehend the complex events of contemporary Belarus, which remain relatively unknown to the North American public. ●

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Development of Belarusian Studies in the West

By Jan Zaprudnik

Definition of the Topic

Let me briefly define the topic and its limitation. The word "studies" is used very broadly here to include not only research results, but also the availability of information on Belarus. For several reasons I have limited discussion of my topic to texts in English, German, and French. These three major languages are taught at the European Humanitarian University in Minsk. Coextensively, there are three Western centers of learning at the same university: the Institute for German Studies, the American Studies Center, and the French-Belarusian Faculty for Political and Managerial Sciences.

Of course, there are writings on Belarus in other Western languages. The disintegration of the Soviet Union has been too important an event not to attract worldwide attention to its profound consequences, one of which is an independent Belarusian state. However, for reasons of geography, economics and politics, the bulk of texts on Belarus is being produced in the three languages I have mentioned.

The time frame of my talk is limited to the post-WW II period, because in the preceding years Belarus in the West had been terra incognita. A Polish-born friend of the Belarusian Institute of Arts and Sciences in New York, Dr. Joseph Lichten of the Anti-Defamation League, related to us in the mid-'50s how in 1940 he had been contacted by an official from the State Department looking for basic information on Belarus. Apparently, the Library of Congress was not of much help to him. Today the situation is significantly different and better. This past January, while vacationing in Florida, I went to a branch of the Tampa public library to satisfy my curiosity about the availability of information on Belarus. A user-friendly computer generated a listing of 59 magazine articles on Belarus. I also discovered a list of 14 recent English-language books devoted if not entirely, at least partially, to the country. A friend of mine told me recently that he had a similar encounter with a Belarus-informing computer in Anchorage, Alaska. The Online Computer Library Center lists 270 titles only with "Belarus" or its variants as the first word. The Internet is flooded with information on current events in the country. President Lukashenka's frenzied effort to resuscitate the crumbled Russian empire, and now to thrust himself into the Kosovo crisis, stimulates outside interest in the nation that has been known hitherto as a "quiet" republic.

Although current information on Belarus abounds, the number of monographs in the three languages under discussion is rather modest. Scholarly Belarusica consists mostly of articles. They are scattered in periodicals, some of them defunct, such as the *Belorussian Review* of the Munich-based and American-sponsored Institute for the Study of the USSR, or *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies* of the Anglo-Belarusian Society, discontinued in 1988. Very little substantial discussion of Belarusian matters is to be found in the *Slavic Review*, *Russian Review*, *Slavonic and East European Journal* and other Western journals, with the exception of *Osteuropa*. During the Soviet period, Belarusian studies were neglected in the West for three basic reasons: 1) the lack of publicized national dissent in Belarus, 2) the very small number of academics of Belarusian extraction and 3) the general Russocentrism of Western Sovietology. Unfortunately, there is no full retroactive bibliography of Belarusica in main Western languages. The one that is being prepared at the Belarusian Institute of Arts and Sciences in New Jersey, has a year or two to go before it appears in book form. While preparing this presentation, I have collected a bibliography of articles and reports on Belarus in English, German and French for the last two years, a kind of supplement to the bibliography in my book, *Historical Dictionary of Belarus*, which was published last year by Scarecrow Press.

Belarusian studies in Western languages can be divided into two general categories: pre-independence and post-independence. Those of the pre-1991 period are affected by the Cold War atmosphere. The first English-language publications were authored by fresh political refugees from Belarus. They dealt essentially with Soviet oppression and myth, bringing to light prohibited literary works and promoting the cause of an independent democratic Belarus. Those publications were circumscribed by the personal qualifications of their authors who for the most part were humanists. Hence the heavy emphasis on cultural matters. A list of ten major monographs published before 1991 shows that seven out of the ten books selected are devoted to either literature or language.¹ Not much was written on economy, demography, and social issues. Although the Soviet Belarusian republic had its foreign ministry and a seat in the United Nations, the country's foreign policy was not discussed at all because there was none; foreign affairs, as we know, were handled exclusively by the central government. The situation changed with the achievement of independence in 1991, however precariously the latter seems to be.

Since 1991, the republic has been a player on the international arena enjoying widening contacts with other states and being forced to choose allies and positions. This naturally led to a growing number of specialists interested in Belarus. The membership directory of the AAASS for the years 1997-1999, for example, lists 109 names of members who indicated Belarus as an area of interest. The growing cultural exchanges between Belarus and the West, as well as the settlement of new Belarusians in Western countries, have been contributing factors to the advancement of Belarusian studies. Coincidentally, three new Belarusological quarterlies were launched in the last three years in France, England and Germany. Along with the ten-year old quarterly *Belarusian Review*, they provide ample coverage of events and trends in Belarus. Educational and scholarly exchanges grow. London's *Belarusian Chronicle*, for example, wrote in its latest issue: "Universities are receiving an increasing number of students from Belarus, and there is a similar growth in the number of British students in Belarus."²

The bibliography on Belarus, that I have collected from English, German and French sources for the last two years (over 220 entries), indicates not only growth of Belarusian studies, but also limitations. Reports and analyses deal mainly with the political upheaval in the republic, legislative matters, economy, the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, human rights abuses, NGOs, foreign policy issues, lack of national identity among Belarusians, and, occasionally, national minorities. On the other hand, Belarusian literature and culture, which had traditionally been the harbingers of national aspirations, have been woefully neglected. I must stress that it is impossible to fully understand the strivings and dreams of the Belarusian nation without an examination of its culture and current literature. Studies of literature require, of course, knowledge of the language, which, I admit, is a serious barrier. However, shortcuts through Western-language translations, scant as they are, are highly unreliable. The problem is that many of those translations (e.g. works of Vasil Bykau) were done from Russian during the Soviet period and, as stated by the author himself, suffered from additional censorship: many references to Belarusian national traits and goals were omitted or, even worse, substituted with Russian characteristics. Another neglected subject of current Belarusian studies in the West is the history of the national intelligentsia. Such studies, if they were conducted, would significantly help in understanding the historical underpinnings of the current democratic opposition in Belarus. As to Belarusian nationalism, another important and unexplored aspect of Belarusian studies, it is finally beginning to attract the attention of Western scholars. For example, an excellent panel on the subject was held at the convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities at the Harriman Institute of Columbia University on April 16 of this year.

There are still persistent myths about Belarus that are perpetuated by the lack of studies. One of them is the notion that Belarus is a poor peasant country unable to sustain itself economically. Well, it is true that the country is now going through an economic crisis similar to those in Russia and Ukraine. But there are also hard economic and demographic facts debunking the myth of Belarus being a rural enclave of East Europe. Belarus' population is 70 percent urban. The agricultural production in the country's 1997 Gross Domestic Product was only 11.5 percent, while industry comprised 31.5 percent and service 35.6 percent.³ Belarus, as so many other countries in the world, lacks some natural resources and has the abundance of others, among which favorable geographic location and high educational level of the population should be counted. As to the country's economic woes, they come not from the nature's meagerness, but rather from poor politics and, if one looks deeper, arguably, from the geopolitical situation.

English-Language Belarusica

The earliest center of Belarusian studies was the Munich-based and American-sponsored Institute for the Study of the USSR of the 1950s. Among the institute's serial publications was the English-language *Belorussian Review* of which eight issues appeared (1954-1959). The journal was devoted largely to questions regarding nationality policy in Soviet Belarus, with a predominance of cultural matters, although economy and Communist party politics were also treated. Belarusian problems were discussed in some other collective works of the institute.

Another center of Belarusian studies has been the London-based Anglo-Belarusian Society with its uniquely rich

Belarusan Library and Museum. In the years from 1965 to 1988, the society's annual *Journal of Byelorussian Studies* provided solid articles on pre-1917 Belarus emphasizing the country's cultural heritage. It also reviewed books from Soviet Belarus, chronicled Belarusan cultural life and provided a selective current bibliography. Along with Belarusan émigré authors, many contributors to the journal were British and other Western scholars. Since the cessation of the journal, two volumes of *Occasional Papers* appeared in the '90s. The Anglo-Belarusian Society continues its activity, although on a reduced scale in terms of publications. Since 1997, the quarterly *Belarusian Chronicle* has been providing a panoramic view of British-Belarusan events.

The New York-based Whiteruthenian (since 1991, Belarusan) Institute of Arts and Sciences, although in existence since 1950, has published mostly in Belarusan so far, including the 22 volumes of its irregularly published journal, *Zapisy* (Annals). Since 1975, some materials in the *Zapisy* were published either in English or with English-language summaries. The journal has been devoted almost exclusively to historical, political and cultural matters. The only English-language book published by the institute is Vitaut Kipel and Zora Kipel's *Byelorussian Statehood: Reader and Bibliography*.⁴ Importantly, the book deals with the early stages of the twentieth-century Belarusan national movement that led to the proclamation of the Belarusan Democratic Republic in 1918 and its Bolshevik substitute, the Belarusan Soviet Socialist Republic, in 1919.

German-Language Belarusica

Of all Western countries, Germany has been the closest to Belarus, geographically and historically, and since 1991, economic interests have been stimulating the German-Belarusan relations. However, Belarus as an independent country is a new notion for most outsiders, including Germans. "So far," says German scholar Rainer Lindner who specializes in Belarusan history and politics, "not much has been known about Belarus in our country. Only recently, more fundamental studies began in history, political science and linguistics of Belarus." Indeed, Belarusan studies in Germany, and to a lesser degree in Austria, are gaining momentum. A center for contemporary Belarusan studies was set up last year at the Goettinger Arbeitskreis. Its coordinator is Dr. Heinz Timmermann of the Federal Institute for East European and International Studies in Cologne. He often writes on Belarusan topics. In Germany today, there are several centers that collect data on Belarus. According to Astrid Lorenz of the Humboldt University in Berlin, regular reports on the Belarusan economy are published by the Deutsche Institut fuer Wirtschaftsforschung in Berlin, Institut fuer Wirtschaft at Kiel University, and the Institut fuer Wirtschaftsforschung in Halle. This year, the German Society for Belarusan Culture, Politics, and Economy will be established as an umbrella institution for all the existing German-Belarusan initiatives and projects. Conversely, there is a growing interest in German language among young Belarusans, as noted recently by Dr. Michael Staack, the founding director of the Center for German Studies at the European Humanitarian University in Minsk.

An excellent quarterly bulletin, *Belarus-News*, was launched in 1998 by a group of German scholars providing concise analyses of main developments in Belarus, including current bibliography of German newspaper reports and Belarusica on the Internet. A 500-page German-language "Handbook for Belarusan History" is to be published next

year. The authors are mostly from Belarus, Poland, Germany, and Canada.

In Austria, Belarusan studies are conducted at the universities of Salzburg, Vienna, Gratz, and Innsbruck. Several specialists in Belarusan language, literature and culture are active, of whom Hermann Bieder and Ferdinand Neureiter have been the most prolific.

French-Language Belarusica

In France, very little was published on Belarus before 1991. Since the mid-1990s, the situation has been different thanks to two young enthusiasts, Alexandra Goujon, who specializes in contemporary political history of Belarus, and Virginie Symaniec, whose field is Belarusan theater history and contemporary culture. Both have third-generation Belarusan roots and knowledge of their forebears' language. One of their major contributions to Belarusan studies in France is the monograph, *Parlons bielorrussien. Langue et culture*, published in 1997. In 1996, with the help of others, they established the Association for the Development of Research, Information and Culture of Belarus. The association, presided over by historian Bruno Drweski, publishes a quarterly, *Perspectives Bielorrussiennes*, an informative 12-page bulletin supplemented by *Revue de presse*. The publication covers current developments in Belarus with emphasis on political, cultural and foreign policy issues.

A Look to the Future

Belarus has attracted much international attention due to the frenetic behavior of its president, Alaksandr Lukashenka. At a time when the situation in Russia is growing dangerously explosive, Belarus - the "weakest link" around the perimeter of imperial Russia - is becoming an important indicator of possible geopolitical shifts. Mark Nordberg and Taras Kuzio of Birmingham University, in a recently published volume, *Belorussiya i Rossiya: obshchestva i gosudarstva*, do not dismiss an ominous development. "The Belarusan quasi-state," they wrote, "could become a catalyst turning the process of building a contemporary nation and state in Russia into a process of restoring the empire."⁵ In a similar vein, Congressman Christopher H. Smith, chairman of the congressional (Helsinki) Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, has expressed apprehension that "Lukashenka's efforts at political and economic integration with Russia could have serious potential consequences for neighboring states, especially Ukraine."⁶ Such warnings make Belarus, which until now has clearly been an understudied country, worthy of scholarly interest. There is a very justifiable need for a funded center of Belarusan studies in the USA. Where? How about Harvard? Was it not here that two major books on Belarus, Nicholas Vakar's *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation* and Michael Urban's *An Algebra of Soviet Power: Elite Circulation in the Belorussian Republic, 1966-1986* were published? It is also significant, and perhaps prophetic, that this first major international conference on Belarus in the West has been organized at Harvard. So, why can it not be that a center for Belarusan studies also be established at Harvard? Hoping and praying that it will happen one day.

I thank you for your attention.

Dr. Jan Zaprudnik is the vice president of the Belarusan Institute of Arts and Sciences in New York, USA.

Refer to **NOTES** on p. 19:

NOTES:

1) Vladimir Seduro. *The Byelorussian Theater and Drama* (New York: Research Program on the USSR, 1955); Nicholas Vakar. *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation* (Harvard University Press, 1956); Anthony Adamovich. *Opposition to Sovietization in Belorussian Literature. 1917-1957* (Scarecrow Press, 1958); Vera Rich. *Like Water, Like Fire. An Anthology of Byelorussian Poetry from 1828 to the Present Day* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971); Ivan S. Lubachko. *Belorussia Under Soviet Rule, 1917-1957* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1972); Valentina Pashkovich. *Fundamental Byelorussian. Books I and II* (Toronto: Byelorussian-Canadian Coordinating Committee, 1974, 1978); Peter J. Mayo. *A Grammar of Byelorussian* (Sheffield, UK: University of Sheffield, 1976); Arnold B. McMillin. *A History of Byelorussian Literature: From Its Origins to the Present Day* (Giessen, Germany: Wilhelm Schmitz Verlag, 1977); John Sadouski. *A History of the Byelorussians in Canada* (Belleville, Ontario: Mika Publishing Co., 1981). Michael Urban. *An Algebra of Soviet Power: Elite Circulation in the Belorussian Republic, 1966-1986*. (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1989).

2) *Belarusian Chronicle* 4 (1998): 7.

3) *Belarus: gosudarstvo, upravleniye, chelovek. Natsionalnyy otchet o chelovecheskom razvitiy '98*. Minsk: United Nations Development Program, 1998): 121.

4) New York: Byelorussian Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1998.

5) D. Ye. Furman, ed. *Belorussiya i Rossiya: obshchestva i gosudarstva* (Moscow: "Prava cheloveka," 1998) : 391.

6) *Congressional Record* (February 9, 1999): E182.

[**Editor:** This paper also includes an extensive bibliographic supplement.]

NEWS BRIEFS

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BELARUS SUSPENDS CONTACTS WITH NATO — Foreign Ministry spokesman Mikalay Barysevich said on 1 April that Belarus has recalled its permanent mission from NATO headquarters in Brussels and will suspend its participation in the Partnership for Peace program. In response to NATO's air strikes against Yugoslavia, Belarus has broken off bilateral contacts with the U.S. and other NATO members. It has also evacuated 18 of the 19 Belarusian observers from the OSCE monitoring mission in Kosova. (RFE/RL Newslines, April 2, 1999)

OSCE, U.S. URGE BELARUS TO FREE OPPOSITION LEADER — OSCE Chairman Knut Vollebaek on 1 April called on Belarus to immediately release former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir, who is a candidate in the alternative presidential elections. Vollebaek said Chyhir's arrest is an "unjustified political maneuver against the opposition, designed to quash its presidential election efforts." U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin on 31 March expressed "deep concern" over the situation in Belarus. He urged Minsk to release Chyhir and appealed to the Belarusian authorities to start a "constructive and equal dialogue" with the opposition. (RFE/RL Newslines, April 2, 1999)

BELARUS HOLDS LOCAL ELECTIONS — Belarus held local elections on 4 April, in which 26,883 candidates were running for 24,524 seats on city and village councils. The elections were boycotted by major opposition parties whose leading activists have been de facto barred from taking part in the race by a decree issued by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka (see RFE/RL Newslines, 16 December 1998). "Some 90 percent of constituencies have only one candidate, like in Soviet times," Yuri Khadyka from the opposition Belarusian Popular Front told Reuters. According to preliminary data from the Central Electoral Commission on 5 April, the election turnout was 66.3 percent. (RFE/RL Newslines, April 6, 1999)

OSCE SLAMS LOCAL ELECTIONS AS UNDEMOCRATIC Hans-Georg Wieck, head of the OSCE mission in Minsk, said on 5 April that the local election law in Belarus "cannot provide for a free and fair election process." According to Wieck, Lukashenka has "changed the character of elections from a democratically organized, competitive event...to an event characterized by the interest of the state in organizing political support for its institutions and leaders." Wieck denied that the OSCE sent its official observers to watch the elections, saying that his mission monitored the vote as part of its regular work in studying human rights in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newslines, April 6, 1999)

LUKASHENKA ORDERS DIPLOMACY TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC INTERESTS — At a meeting with the Foreign Ministry senior staff on 5 April, Lukashenka demanded that diplomats step up their work to promoting Belarusian economic interests abroad, Belarusian Television reported. Citing Belarus's negative trade balance with a dozen countries, Lukashenka said he will assess diplomatic work on the basis of "practical results" in Belarus' foreign trade and threatened to replace some ineffectual ambassadors. Interfax reported that Lukashenka urged the Foreign Ministry to normalize relations with the U.S. by offering Washington the "tactics of small steps toward one another." (RFE/RL Newslines, April 6, 1999)

ELECTION VIOLATIONS IN BELARUS REPORTED — Observers from Belarusian NGOs have reported violations during the local elections in Belarus on 4 April, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 5 April. According to those reports, one polling station in the Haradotski raion of Vitsebsk Oblast was not open, while the commission was visiting voters at home with the ballot boxes. Observers from Homel questioned the official turnout of 66 percent, saying that at three monitored constituencies it was below 40 percent. In Brest, two candidates were present at the ballot boxes all day prompting voters to vote for them. Belapan reported that, according to Social Democratic Party activists, people with ballot boxes in Barysau visited voters at home, accompanied by a police officer in an "attempt to intimidate those residents of the city who had no intention to take part in the [election] farce." (RFE/RL Newslines, April 7, 1999)

LUKASHENKA SLAMS RUSSIAN TV FOR COVERAGE OF KOSOVA CRISIS — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 5 April accused Russian central television channels

of taking a "more and more pro-American stance" in their coverage of the Kosova crisis, ITAR-TASS reported on 6 April. Lukashenka said the Russian channels are trying to suggest that "it was Milosevic that led to the humanitarian catastrophe, and not the bombings by the North Atlantic alliance." (RFE/RL Newsline, April 7, 1999)

PROMINENT BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST DIES — Henadz Karpenka, deputy speaker of the opposition Supreme Soviet and head of the opposition shadow cabinet, died in a hospital on 6 April at the age of 49 after surgery for a brain hemorrhage. "I realize that we may not be able to complete our task. However, we are making a long step on the path of democracy," Karpenka told RFE/RL last month, commenting on the opposition's initiative to hold alternative presidential elections this May. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 7, 1999)

BELARUSIAN RUBLE PLUNGES AHEAD OF SPRING SOWING. —The Belarusian ruble has plunged by 11.5 percent against the dollar in the past six days, Belapan reported on 6 April. On the non-cash transaction market, which is not controlled by the state Belarusian Currency and Stock Exchange, the exchange rate stood at 475,000 Belarusian rubles to \$1. The National Bank exchange rate on 5 April was 238,000 Belarusian rubles to \$1, while the street exchange rate reached 360,000 Belarusian rubles to \$1. Currency dealers attribute the ruble plunge to massive National Bank loans issued in early April to agricultural enterprises ahead of the sowing campaign. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 7, 1999)

LUKASHENKA LASHES OUT AT WEST FOR 'SLANDERING' HIS RULE — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka delivered a more than two-hour televised address to the National Assembly on 7 April in the presence of several invited Western diplomats. Lukashenka blamed Western envoys for misinforming their countries about the actual situation in Belarus and for "slandering" his rule. He accused the West of financing the opposition's alternative presidential elections, saying that the opposition is buying "not only Xerox copiers and paper for their leaflets, but weapons as well. Leave the Belarusian people in peace! Stop this pressure!...For your movements in neighboring Poland and Lithuania you will get what you deserve—we are not in Yugoslavia," he told the diplomats, departing from his written speech. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 8, 1999)

IMF FOR NOT GIVING CREDITS — Lukashenka told his legislature that Belarus is the only country in the post-Soviet area that the IMF has not given "a single dollar [or even] a single cent" in credits because of political motives. According to him, international financial organizations do not want to cooperate with Belarus because they do not like the fact that it has not become a "sanitary cordon between Russia and the West. We will survive without external assistance. Yes, we are poor but not on our knees. Our force is in unity, cohesion, in ideological values of ordinary people, not of businessmen," the Belarusian president said. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 8, 1999)

RUSSIA BLAMED FOR UNWILLINGNESS TO UNITE Lukashenka accused Russia of being unwilling to seek a serious unification with Belarus. He said Minsk has already prepared a "cardinal draft treaty" on the creation of a unified Belarusian-Russian state, while Russia is proposing to sign only a "protocol of intent." He said "Enough of just striving. If we are going to create a single state, let's do it. If not, we should say flatly that we are not going to do it." He added that the Belarusian-Russian union is opposed not only by global forces that are "afraid of Slavic unity," but also by some circles in Russia, which he did not identify. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 8, 1999)

CABINET BLAMED FOR ECONOMIC WOES — Reporting on Belarus's economic achievements in 1998, Lukashenka said that "several key macroeconomic parameters" significantly worsened, particularly in the second half of the year. "The change of the situation on foreign markets, primarily in Russia, had a negative impact," he commented. Lukashenka slammed the cabinet for failing to regulate production between state-run enterprises and to control pricing. He said the main economic task in 1999 is to increase industrial output by 4-5 percent. He pledged that requirements with regard to political and business leaders will be even tougher than before and threatened imprisonment for those disobeying his orders. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 8, 1999)

LUKASHENKA LAUNCHES SOWING CAMPAIGN IN BELARUS Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka held a televised conference on 8 April devoted to spring sowing, calling the event a major economic and political issue of the year. According to Lukashenka, the current international situation "urgently dictates" that Belarus must secure food stocks. "If we have bread, we will be strong...Today almost the entire republic is getting down to work in the field," he told agricultural managers. Belapan reported that Lukashenka ordered Deputy Premier Alyaksandr Papkou to inform every collective farm — "without paying attention to any democratic norms or principles" — "how much to sow and how much to harvest." National Bank Chairman Pyotr Prakapovich said on 8 April that Belarusian banks will release 20 trillion Belarusian rubles (\$84 million) and \$40 million in credits to finance the sowing campaign. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 9, 1999)

FORMER BELARUSIAN PREMIER TO BE JAILED FOR THREE MONTHS — Mikhail Chyhir, former prime minister and a candidate in the 16 May opposition presidential elections, was officially charged on 8 April with "grand larceny" and "abuse of office." According to a court ruling, Chyhir, who was arrested on 30 March, will stay in jail for three months. Authorities say Chyhir is suspected of embezzling \$1 million during his tenure at Belagroprombank, which he headed before Lukashenka appointed him prime minister in 1994. The opposition maintains that Chyhir's persecution is politically motivated. Meanwhile, former National Bank Chairwoman Tamara Vinnikava, who spent 10 months in a KGB prison and has been under house arrest since November 1997, has disappeared, according to official reports. No court charges against Vinnikava have so far been made. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 9, 1999)

VEGETABLES RATIONED IN BELARUSIAN CITY —The city authorities in Hrodna, northwestern Belarus, have introduced the rationed sale of vegetables, Belarusian Television reported on 10 April. According to the new regulation, one customer is not allowed to buy more than 5 kilograms of potatoes and/or 2 kg of cabbages, beets, or carrots in a city shop. According to the television report, the authorities were forced to introduce rationing because a "considerable part of [Hrodna Oblast] vegetable stocks" had already been sold to "commercial structures" (a term usually applied to non-state firms) without coordination with local authorities. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 12, 1999)

LUKASHENKA TO PUNISH FARMERS NOT MEETING QUOTAS — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has signed a decree "on responsibility for [those] failing to fulfill supplies of agricultural products to the state," Belarusian Television reported on 8 April. Under the decree, collective farm managers who refuse to sign contracts with the state on agricultural supplies or fail to fulfill such contracts may be disciplined for a "gross violation of labor obligations." In

particular, those avoiding to sign such contracts may be fined up to 200 minimum wages. Pre-paid state contracts for agricultural supplies — which usually set prices for agricultural products below their production cost—are the principal method of running the state-sponsored agricultural sector in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 12, 1999)

LUKASHENKA TO VISIT BELGRADE OVER KOSOVO CRISIS

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is planning to visit Yugoslavia on 14 April, following an invitation from Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. Foreign Minister Ural Latypau said on 13 April that Lukashenka will "discuss political settlement of the conflict, sending aid, as well as Yugoslavia's desire to join the [Belarus-Russia] union. The union cannot be made too quickly, it requires a lot of time," Reuters quoted him as saying. Lukashenka has so far not commented on Yugoslavia's vote to join the Union of Belarus and Russia (UBR). The issue of Yugoslavia's admission to the UBR has not been put on the agenda of a UBR Executive Committee session in Minsk on 13 April. (See related Russian and Yugoslav stories). (RFE/RL Newsline, April 13, 1999)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES STEP UP PRESSURE ON OPPOSITION

— The authorities have intensified pressure on territorial electoral commissions that are preparing for the opposition presidential elections set for 16 May. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. According to RFE/RL correspondents, the regional KGB directorates and prosecutor's offices have begun to summon electoral commission members for interrogations "on a large scale." According to Barys Hyunter, secretary of the opposition Central Electoral Commission, the authorities are looking to accuse commission head Viktor Hanchar of a "plot to seize power" after they had failed to charge him with "usurping official position. As far as I know, no commission member has been forced into signing a refusal to participate in his commission," Hyunter said. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 13, 1999)

LUKASHENKA FLIES TO BELGRADE — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka flew to Belgrade on 14 April to meet with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. According to ITAR-TASS, Lukashenka told journalists before departing that his trip is "to continue the mission of Russian Prime Minister Yevgenii Primakov." ITAR-TASS also reported that NATO informed Lukashenka that his flight to Yugoslavia would be undesirable, while Lukashenka's deputy chief of staff Ivan Pashkevich said NATO "has not officially responded to our request" regarding Lukashenka's trip. Belarusian Television reported on 13 April that Russian President Boris Yeltsin has instructed "appropriate Russian structures" to guarantee the safety of Lukashenka's flight to Belgrade. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 14, 1999)

BELARUS-RUSSIAN INTEGRATION BODY HOLDS SESSION IN MINSK

— The Executive Committee of the Union of Belarus and Russia met in Minsk on 13 April to discuss about 20 economic issues. The meeting ended with the signing of two government agreements on control over exports and on price regulation in the transport, communication, and gas sectors. Russian First Deputy Premier Vadim Gustov commented that "we are fulfilling instructions of both presidents in order to sign—apparently, in June, because we have so far not been given another date — this fateful agreement between Russia and Belarus." Lukashenka and Yeltsin agreed on 25 December last year to prepare by mid-1999 a treaty on a Belarusian-Russian union state. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 14, 1999)

LUKASHENKA REPORTS 'THOUSANDS' OF NATO SOLDIERS DESERT TO ROMANIA — After returning from Yugoslavia on 14 April, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukash-

enka told journalists that a possible intervention of NATO ground troops in Yugoslavia will have a negative impact primarily on the U.S., ITAR-TASS reported on 15 April. "When thousands of coffins come to the U.S., the public opinion in this country will change within a day," Lukashenka said. Citing Yugoslav sources, Lukashenka said he "has been surprised by the fact that thousands of NATO soldiers are deserting," ITAR-TASS reported. "They pay \$500 and are transferred to the border with Romania, where they change their clothes and escape," the agency quoted him as saying. Lukashenka stressed that Yugoslavia's losses in equipment are virtually nil. "All the artillery, all the tanks [and] even aircraft are standing on the roads. The Yugoslavs have saved everything," he said. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 15, 1999)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES SAY EXILED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE INELIGIBLE

— Belarusian Deputy Justice Minister Volha Syarheyeva has stated that Zyanon Paznyak, exiled leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, cannot be a candidate in the opposition presidential elections because of his three-year stay abroad. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 14 April. To support her claim, Syarheyeva cited the Belarusian Constitution stipulating that a presidential candidate must "permanently reside in the Republic of Belarus for at least 10 years directly before the elections." Paznyak received political asylum in the United States in 1996 and has remained outside Belarus since then. Mikhail Pastukhou, a former Constitutional Court judge, said that the constitutional requirement of permanent residence means having a permanent residence permit in Belarus. According to Pastukhou, both Paznyak and another candidate, Mikhail Chyhir, who is currently in jail, have the right to run in the elections. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 15, 1999)

BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENT TRADE UNION ACTIVIST DISCIPLINED

— Syarhey Antonchyk, an independent trade unionist and head of the Belarusian Strike Committee, has been fined 10 million Belarusian rubles (\$41.50) for "organizing and holding an unsanctioned rally" at a plant in Orsha (northeastern Belarus) in early March. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 14 April. Antonchyk says that he only conversed with a group of workers. The incriminating verdict was passed despite evidence supplied by plant workers and two policemen that the meeting did not resemble a rally. The policemen also testified that Antonchyk's conversation with workers was attended by "at least two KGB officers." (RFE/RL Newsline, April 15, 1999)

FORMER BELARUSIAN PREMIER CONSIDERED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE

— Amnesty International said on 15 April that former Belarusian Premier Mikhail Chyhir is a prisoner of conscience who has been imprisoned by the government of Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka for running in the opposition presidential elections scheduled for 16 May. "He appears to have been targeted by the authorities solely because of his political beliefs and peaceful opposition activities," Amnesty International said in a statement. Chyhir is to stay in jail for three months under official charges of "abuse of office" and "grand larceny" in connection with a \$1 million non-repaid credit he issued to a Canadian firm as head of Belagroprombank. Chyhir's wife told RFE/RL on 14 April that the Canadian firm has already supplied evidence that the former Belarusian premier cannot be blamed for non-repayment of the credit. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 16, 1999)

BELARUS HOLDS LOCAL ELECTION RUNOFF — According to official data, 45.6 percent of the eligible voters participated in the local election runoff on 16 April. BelaPAN reported the next day. Under the local election law, the second round of

voting is valid if turnout exceeds 25 percent. After the runoff vote, all but two of the regional and village councils in Belarus have a quorum. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 19, 1999)

BELARUS' POLISH MINORITY LEADER DETAINED — The Belarusian police on 17 April arrested Tadeusz Gawin, chairman of the Union of Poles in Belarus, for organizing an unsanctioned picket in Hrodna. Gawin is to stand trial on 21 April for disturbing the public order. The protesters brandished posters blaming the central and local authorities for "suppressing the Polish educational system" in Belarus. "Gazeta wyborcza" reported on 19 April. Belarus' Poles complain that since Alyaksandr Lukashenka became president in 1994, they have not been allowed to build new Polish-language schools in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 19, 1999)

OSCE CRITICIZED FOR IGNORING BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION — Andrey Sannikau, Belarusian former deputy foreign minister and leader of the Charter-97 opposition group, has criticized the OSCE mission in Minsk for avoiding a clear stance on the "most topical problems of the Belarusian situation," RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 20 April. Sannikau took part in a Washington human rights seminar on the role of the OSCE missions in Kosovo, Bosnia, and the former Soviet republics. According to Sannikau, the OSCE mission in Minsk "simply ignores the most essential political dates of 16 May and 20 July." The opposition Supreme Soviet scheduled presidential elections in Belarus for 16 May, as stipulated under the 1994 constitution, which it observes. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's term in office expires on 20 July. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 21, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST MEETS STROBE TALBOTT — Andrey Sannikau, international coordinator for the Charter 97 civic initiative and a former Belarusian deputy foreign minister, met with U.S. State Department Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott in Washington on 22 April to discuss the situation in Belarus, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. Sannikau told RFE/RL that he is glad the U.S. has not changed its position vis-a-vis the Lukashenka regime and remains committed to restoring democratic principles in Belarus. Sannikau told Talbott that the U.S. should send its ambassador back to Belarus because of the "very tense situation in Belarus's current economic and political life." The U.S. recalled its ambassador to Washington last year following the eviction of Western diplomats from the Drazdy residential area. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 23, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OFFICIAL URGES OPPOSITION TO GIVE FUNDS TO NEEDY — Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Zamyatalin appealed on Belarusian Television on 21 April to the Belarusian opposition to contribute its "many millions intended for the illegitimate, phony elections in mid-May" to a children's home. The appeal appeared in connection with the nationwide "subbotnik" (a Soviet-time practice of voluntary unpaid work on Saturdays) now under way in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 23, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION MARKS CHORNOBYL ACCIDENT ANNIVERSARY — Some 7,000 opposition demonstrators rallied in Minsk on 25 April to mark the 13th anniversary of the Chernobyl accident and to protest President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's policies, AP reported. The demonstrators criticized the proposed union between Belarus, Russia, and Yugoslavia and demanded the release of Mikhail Chyhir, a candidate in the opposition presidential elections, who has been arrested on embezzlement charges. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 26, 1999)

RUSSIAN DEFENSE MINISTER WINDS UP MINSK VISIT — At a 23 April news conference concluding his three-day visit

to Belarus, Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev said Moscow and Minsk have agreed on creating a joint military grouping, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. He did not elaborate. Sergeev and Lukashenka also made a decision on the assembly of Russian SU-27 military aircraft at Belarusian plants. The previous day, Sergeev visited a missile early warning station under construction at Hantsavichy. He noted that the station is 90-96 percent ready and will begin full operations in 2000. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 26, 1999)

POLL SAYS LUKASHENKA HAS MORE OPPONENTS THAN SUPPORTERS — Aleh Manayeu, director of the Independent Institute for Social, Political, and Economic Studies, has said the number of Lukashenka's opponents exceed that of his supporters for the first time since he was elected president in 1994, BelaPAN reported on 24 April. A March poll showed 21.8 percent of the respondents consider themselves "convinced supporters" of Lukashenka and 26.1 percent "convinced opponents." Meanwhile, a poll taken in Minsk on 17-22 April showed that 54 percent of respondents want presidential elections to be held in 1999, rather than in 2001. The former date is in accordance with the 1994 constitution, which was abolished after the controversial referendum two years later. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 26, 1999)

BELARUS TO OFFER RUSSIA 'RADICAL' DRAFT UNION TREATY — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka told Belarusian Television on 26 April that his talks with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Moscow on 28 April will touch upon the preparation of a draft union treaty between Belarus and Russia and the implementation of agreements reached earlier. Meanwhile, an unidentified Belarusian source told Interfax the same day that Belarus has drafted a treaty that envisions the post of president as well as a joint government and parliament for the union state. According to unnamed experts working on the draft treaty, the document is of a "radical character in terms of integration" and calls for a single power structure and administration within the union. Belarusian experts argue that Belarus should hold a referendum on the formation of a union state with Russia and on the necessary constitutional amendments. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 27, 1999)

LUKASHENKA PRAISES UKRAINIAN COMMUNISTS FOR ANTI-NATO STANCE — The Belarusian president has hailed the Ukrainian Supreme Council resolution condemning the NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia and urging the government to restrict cooperation with the alliance, Belarusian Television reported on 26 April. At the same time, Lukashenka expressed his regret that President Leonid Kuchma participated in the NATO summit in Washington. Lukashenka made these comments to a visiting Ukrainian Supreme Council delegation, led by Communist leader Petro Symonenko. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 27, 1999)

LUKASHENKA DISSATISFIED WITH CABINET'S PERFORMANCE — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka told a cabinet meeting on 27 April that he is dissatisfied with the government's economic performance, but he declined to take any personnel decisions, Belarusian Television reported. Lukashenka noted that from January to March, the government was able to meet only one of its 12 socioeconomic targets for this year—namely, an increase in industrial production. According to reports given by ministers, economic development in Belarus is hindered, above all, by the nonpayment of Belarusian exports to Russia, an increasing number of barter deals, the instability of the Belarusian ruble, and sinking agricultural production. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 28, 1999)

EU MISSION IN MINSK TO PROMOTE POLITICAL DIALOGUE — An EU delegation of regional policy department heads from the Foreign Ministries of Germany, Austria, and Finland met with Belarusian Foreign Minister Ural Latypau on 27 April and Belarusian oppositionists the next day. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 28 April. The two sides discussed the normalization of EU-Belarusian relations. Latypau's spokesman said they resolved to pursue that goal "by small steps," but he did not elaborate. The delegation urged the Belarusian opposition to enter into a political dialogue with the authorities without "any conditions." It declined to provide an answer as to whether the EU will recognize the opposition presidential elections scheduled for 16 May. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 29, 1999)

PACE HOLDS HEARINGS ON BELARUS — The Political Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on 27 April held hearings on the situation in Belarus. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 28 April. The hearings were attended by two parliamentary delegations from Belarus—one from the opposition Supreme Soviet and the other from the official National Assembly. Both Belarusian delegations called their discussions "useful" though at times "very heated." Anatol Lyabedzka and Syarhey Kalyakin from the opposition told an RFE/RL correspondent that a PACE mission may soon visit Belarus. Uladzimir Kanaplyou of the official legislature—which was admitted to PACE hearings for the first time—was also satisfied, saying that "earlier we were only viewers on the balcony, while the opposition mocked us as much as it wanted to." (RFE/RL Newsline, April 29, 1999)

U.S. CONGRESS' HEARING — The same day, the situation in Belarus was discussed by the U.S. Congress Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The hearings were attended by OSCE Minsk mission head Hans Georg Weick, "Charter 97" Belarusian civic initiative coordinator Andrey Sannikau, international human rights activists, and a representative of the Belarusian embassy in Washington. Ross Wilson, an adviser to the U.S. secretary of state, said that "our policy of selective contacts reflects our attitude to President Lukashenka and to what he represents." RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 28 April. Sannikau and Catherine Fitzpatrick, executive director of the International League for Human Rights, urged the U.S. to send back its ambassador to Minsk before 20 July, when Lukashenka's legitimate term in office expires. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 29, 1999)

RUSSIAN-BELARUSIAN MILITARY COOPERATION ON FAST TRACK? — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka revealed on 28 April that he has brought with him to Moscow a more ambitious, more radical plan for the unification of his country and Russia, but he added that he "understands Russia is not ready" yet. Interfax reported. Lukashenka added that since Russia is not ready for the creation of a state with a single president, government, and parliament, then there is no need to change the constitution and organize a referendum, Russian Television reported. "Izvestiya" noted on 29 April that although the economic prospects of the union look "vague," the "military-political" detente is proceeding quickly. "It is friendship [aimed] against NATO that makes the [Russian-Belarusian] friendship so firm now," according to the daily. The two leaders discussed on 28 April a joint defense concept that envisions the two sides using the same types of weapons and equipment for a future joint force, Interfax reported (RFE/RL Newsline, April 29, 1999).

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LAYS DOWN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PROCEDURE — Belarus' opposition Central Electoral Commission, which is organizing presidential elections

in accordance with the 1994 constitution, has adopted procedures for that ballot. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 29 April. Since the authorities have refused to provide polling stations for the elections, the central commission ordered local electoral commission representatives to visit voters' homes with ballot boxes. Voting will take place from 6-16 May. In adopting such a resolution, the commission said it took into account Article 32 of the presidential election law, which allows ballots to be cast at voters' homes if voters cannot visit polling stations because of "health reasons or other valid causes." Commission secretary Barys Hyunter commented to RFE/RL that the voting procedure is "irreproachably" in accordance with the country's legislation. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 30, 1999)

MINSK LABOR DAY CELEBRATION ENDS IN ARRESTS Some 5,000 people participated in a Labor Day rally staged by the city authorities and the Federation of Trade Unions in Minsk, BelaPAN reported. The demonstrators adopted a resolution condemning the NATO action in Yugoslavia and dispersed after 20 minutes. Meanwhile, an alternative demonstration organized by the opposition Social Democratic Party "Narodnaya Hramada" and other groups resulted in arrests. Some 300 opposition demonstrators who sought to disrupt the official rally demanded the release of political prisoners and protested President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's efforts to form a union of Belarus, Russia, and Yugoslavia. The police arrested "Narodnaya Hramada" leader Mikalay Statkevich and 18 other protesters. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 3, 1999)

BELARUS' PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PROCEDURE DEEMED 'OPTIMAL' Viktor Hanchar, chairman of the Central Electoral Commission, which is organizing the opposition presidential elections, said on 30 April that the early voting procedure adopted the previous day is "optimal" in the current political situation, BelaPAN and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. According to Hanchar, some 14,000 members of the 2,300 regional electoral commissions will visit voters in their homes from 6-16 May to ask them to cast ballots in the opposition presidential elections, in which there are two candidates: Mikhail Chyhir and Zyanon Paznyak. The elections will be deemed valid if turnout exceeds 50 percent (or 3.5 million voters). Hanchar criticized Paznyak for demanding that the elections take place on 16 May only. Such a demand, he said, is "cut off from reality" and "threatening to disrupt the elections." (RFE/RL Newsline, May 3, 1999)

U.S. AMBASSADOR RETURNS TEMPORARILY TO BELARUS U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Daniel Speckhard has returned to Belarus for the first time since he was recalled to Washington last June in protest at his eviction from the Drazdy diplomatic compound near Minsk. Speckhard told journalists on 3 May that he will stay in Minsk for one week to examine the Belarusian authorities' offers to provide him with a new residence, BelaPAN reported. Speckhard added that he will also hold meetings with government officials, opposition leaders, and ordinary citizens during his visit, AP reported. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 4, 1999)

BELARUSIAN POPULAR FRONT PROTESTS PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PROCEDURE Following an objection by its exiled leader Zyanon Paznyak, the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) has protested the early voting procedure adopted by the Central Electoral Commission for the May presidential elections, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 3 May. The BNF's protest will be examined by the Supreme Soviet Presidium on 4 May. Syarhey Papkou, chief of Paznyak's election staff, told RFE/RL that the early voting procedure does not conform with the presidential election law. The BNF

wants the elections to be held on 16 May at stationary polling stations, instead of conducting voting at voters' homes from 6-16 May. According to Papkou, the resolution on early voting was adopted "under pressure" from President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 4, 1999)

BELARUSIAN LEGISLATURE BACKS YUGOSLAVIA'S ADMISSION TO UNION WITH RUSSIA The Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of the Belarusian legislature, on 5 May supported the Yugoslav parliament's decision on the accession of Yugoslavia to the Union of Belarus and Russia, ITAR-TASS reported. The Russian Duma adopted a similar resolution on 16 April. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 5, 1999)

BELARUSIAN EARLY PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PROCEDURE CONFIRMED The opposition Supreme Soviet Presidium on 4 May confirmed the legality of the Central Electoral Commission's resolution stipulating that presidential elections in Belarus will take place over 10 days, from 6-16 May, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The resolution was questioned by Zyanon Paznyak, one of the two candidates in the elections. The presidium said that early voting at voters' homes-given the "impossibility of organizing the ballot at specially assigned and equipped facilities"-is in full accordance with the law on presidential elections. The presidium also adopted an appeal urging voters to participate in the elections. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 5, 1999)

JSPECKHARD ADVISES AGAINST ANY ATTEMPT TO PREVENT OPPOSITION ELECTIONS U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Daniel Speckhard told "Naviny" on 4 May that the Belarusian authorities should regard the opposition presidential elections as an expression of the political will of a part of the Belarusian people and should not use force to prevent the vote, BelaPAN reported. Speckhard added that the authorities' attempts to suppress opposition protests by force do not meet Belarus' long-term interests. Speckhard, who is currently on a short visit to Minsk, said certain progress has been made in his talks on the U.S. ambassador's new residence, but he did not specify when he will resume working in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 5, 1999)

BELARUS DELIVERS HUMANITARIAN AID TO BELGRADE A convoy of 30 trucks has delivered humanitarian aid to Belgrade and headed back for Minsk, BelaPAN reported on 4 May. The trucks carried food, tents, clothing, and blankets. Meanwhile, Belarusian Television quoted President Alyaksandr Lukashenka as saying that Belarus is ready to participate in the reconstruction of facilities destroyed by NATO air strikes in Yugoslavia. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 5, 1999)

VOTING STARTS IN OPPOSITION PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN BELARUS In a bid to challenge the authoritarian regime of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the Belarusian opposition on 6 May launched a 10-day voting process in the presidential elections. The elections were scheduled by the Supreme Soviet, Belarus' parliament that was dissolved by Lukashenka after the 1996 controversial referendum which has not been recognized by most European countries. Unable to organize the ballot at stationary polling stations on a single day, the Central Electoral Commission resolved to hold voting at voters' homes from 6-16 May. The candidates in the elections are Zyanon Paznyak, exiled leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, and former Premier Mikhail Chyhir, now jailed by the authorities on charges of "grand larceny." According to the abolished 1994 constitution, to which the opposition remains loyal, Lukashenka's term in office expires on 20 July 1999. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 6, 1999)

MINSK VENDORS PROTEST GOVERNMENT CRACKDOWN ON PRIVATE TRADE Some 2,000 private vendors began a two-day "sitting strike" at the Minsk "Dynamo" market on 5 May to protest the crackdown by the police and tax inspectors on small trade in Belarus, BelaPAN and AP reported. According to the protesters, Lukashenka's decrees on "protecting the consumer market" and on "regulating economic relations" are being used by the authorities for confiscating goods without quality certificates from private traders and subsequently selling them in state-run shops in an attempt to replenish the state budget. Lukashenka's regulations allow authorities to sell confiscated goods without the quality certificates that are required from vendors at city markets. "The situation of traders at city markets is on the verge of an explosion," the protesters said in a letter to the government. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 6, 1999)

LUKASHENKA SEES NO NEED FOR RUSSIAN MILITARY BASES IN BELARUS Belarusian President Alyaksandr on 6 May said he sees no need to build Russian military bases in Belarus since Belarus is a friendly country and its army will also defend Russia if need be, ITAR-TASS and Interfax reported. Lukashenka noted that "the latest events in the world prove the need for modernizing [our] national armed forces", adding that Russia's contribution to this modernization would be desirable. He complained that Russia does not pay for weapons imported from Belarus but it remembers "when we build up a debt for their natural gas and then there is a hue and cry throughout the media," Interfax quoted him as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 7, 1999)

LUKASHENKA CONDEMNS U.S. 'HEGEMONIC PLANS' Some 5,000 veterans gathered in Minsk on 9 May for a march and military parade to celebrate Victory Day, AP reported. Some 2,000 rallied at the Yama memorial built in the former Minsk ghetto to commemorate Jewish victims of World War II in Belarus. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka addressed the veterans, condemning the "hegemonic plans" of the United States which in his opinion is trying to impose its rule on the world, Interfax reported. He denounced NATO's strikes in Yugoslavia, saying that this Balkan country is defending "not only itself, but other countries as well." He also expressed his confidence that Belarus will enter the 21st century "strongly united" with Russia. "Our army has the appropriate strength for the NATO aggressor quickly to loose the desire to dictate conditions," Polish Television quoted Lukashenka as saying to the veterans. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 10, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION CHAIR PLEASSED WITH PRESIDENTIAL POLL Viktor Hanchar, chairman of the opposition Central Electoral Commission, has said he is satisfied with the course of nationwide presidential polls launched on 6 May in defiance of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, an RFE/RL correspondent reported from Minsk on 9 May. According to Hanchar, the opposition presidential campaign is "quite normal and well on course," with some 760,000 people (10 percent of the voters) casting ballots from 6-8 May. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 10, 1999)

BELARUSIAN FORMER INTERIOR MINISTER MISSING The whereabouts of former Interior Minister Yury Zakharanka, a prominent oppositionist, are currently unknown. Zakharanka's wife told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service that on 7 May, he had "called around 10:00 p.m. and said he is on his way home. I was waiting for him. But he never returned." Zakharanka was fired by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 1996. He had tried to form an independent union of law enforcement officers, which prompted prosecutors in Homel to launch a criminal case against him. Following the

disappearance of former National Bank Chairwoman Tamara Vinnikava last month, Zakharenka is the second major figure among those opposed to Lukashenka to disappear under unknown circumstances. The Interior Ministry on 10 May announced it is launching a search for Zakharenka. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 11, 1999)

BELARUS' OPPOSITION ELECTIONS PROCEED, DESPITE DIFFICULTIES According to the opposition Central Electoral Commission, some 1.4 million voters (16 percent of the total electorate) have cast ballots in the presidential elections since voting began at voters' homes on 6 May, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 10 May. Voting is scheduled to end on 16 May. The commission has reported numerous arrests of regional electoral commission members and the confiscation of ballot boxes and ballots by the police. "I am glad with the course and dynamics of voting, despite some faults in the process," commission head Viktor Hanchar commented. Hanchar stressed that the commission will not set up stationary polling stations on 16 May, as demanded by Zyanon Paznyak, a presidential candidate in the elections. According to Hanchar, such an action is "technically impossible" and "politically inexpedient." (RFE/RL Newsline, May 11, 1999)

BELARUS PLEDGES TO LIBERALIZE PRICES, EXCHANGE RATE Pyotr Prapakovich, chairman of the Belarusian National Bank, told the EBRD annual meeting in Kyiv on 11 May that Belarus plans to liberalize prices and lift controls on the exchange rate by the end of this year, Reuters reported. Prapakovich stressed that the most complicated task will be to liberalize exchange rate policies. He said the bank's priority is to maintain current economic growth, which Belarus claims reached 10 percent last year. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 12, 1998)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES THREATEN TO OUTLAW OPPOSITION PARTIES The Justice Ministry has issued a warning threatening to ban 13 opposition parties and non-governmental organizations in connection with their participation in the opposition presidential elections under way in Belarus. The ministry said that the decisions of the Supreme Soviet to hold elections on 16 May and of the Central Electoral Commission to conduct early voting from 6-15 May are illegitimate. It added that its warning may provide legal grounds for rejecting the reregistration bids of those parties. Under President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's decree of 26 January 1999, all public organizations in Belarus must reregister by 1 June. The list of parties that have been warned about being outlawed includes the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, a human rights organization, and the Belarusian Popular Front Party. "There is a smell of terror in the country," Alyaksandr Patupa, a Belarusian human rights activist, commented to RFE/RL on 11 May.

QUESTIONS RAISED ABOUT BELARUSIAN PRESIDENTIAL POLL RESULTS According to Belarus' Central Electoral Commission, as of 11 May nearly 32 percent of the total electorate took part in the early voting for the opposition presidential elections. The Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), whose leader, Zyanon Paznyak, is running in the elections, says that figure is "significantly exaggerated." RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 12 May. BNF Deputy Chairman Syarhey Papkou said the central and regional electoral commissions are falsifying turnout data. He also said that regional commission members are being forced by the central commission to sign blank election protocols. Papkou, however, did not give any concrete examples to support his claim. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 13, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OFFICIALS SEE PRIMAKOV'S OUSTER AS BAD FOR INTEGRATION Ivan Pashkevich, deputy chief of

the presidential staff, told Interfax on 12 May that the dismissal of Russian Premier Yevgenii Primakov may have a "negative impact" on the implementation of economic projects within the framework of the Russian-Belarusian union, "especially at the lower executive level." An unidentified Belarusian senior government official told the agency that the appointment of Sergei Stepashin as acting prime minister will not change the "strategic idea" of creating a Russian-Belarusian union state. But he added that the ouster of Primakov may "tell negatively" on the preparation of union documents and the implementation of joint programs. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 13, 1999)

CANDIDATE WITHDRAWS FROM BELARUS' OPPOSITION PRESIDENTIAL POLLS Zyanon Paznyak, exiled leader of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), has withdrawn his candidacy from the opposition presidential elections in Belarus. He accused the Central Electoral Commission of violating the law by starting to collect ballots 10 days before election day, 16 May, and of falsifying the results. "The elections have been transformed into a criminal adventure, into a deception that draws comparison only with [President Alyaksandr] Lukashenka's referendums," Paznyak said in a statement issued on 13 May. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported the same day that many BNF members of regional electoral commissions have ceased to take part in the polls. "[Paznyak's] action in the current situation is the best gift for Lukashenka," Central Electoral Commission head Viktor Hanchar commented. Voting, however, continues. Meanwhile, the other presidential candidate, former Premier Mikhail Chyhir, is currently detained in jail on charges of embezzlement. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 14, 1999)

LUKASHENKA'S AIDE SAYS UNION WITH RUSSIA IN 'DEAD END' Belarusian presidential aide Mikhail Sazonau told Reuters on 13 May that Russia's political and economic crisis is making the prospect of any unification with Russia increasingly unrealistic. "We have come to a dead end," Sazonau said, commenting on the formation of the new union-state announced last December. He said "Moscow made it very clear" that it will not change its constitution to create a single state with Belarus. Sazonau added that the dismissal of Russian Premier Yevgenii Primakov was also a blow to integration. In his opinion, the idea of the union-state will not be revived until after Russia's presidential elections in 2000. "The creation of a union-state promised us an economic breakthrough. But it turns out that we're hurrying toward a closed door," Sazonau said. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 14, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION CONCLUDES PRESIDENTIAL BALLOT According to Central Electoral Commission estimates, turnout at the unauthorized presidential polls that finished on 16 May was 53 percent or slightly more than 4 million voters, BelaPAN reported. The final results are expected on 19 May. Zyanon Paznyak, one of the two presidential candidates, had withdrawn from the vote last week, claiming election fraud. Many commentators see Paznyak's withdrawal as the beginning of a serious split within the Belarusian opposition. Viktor Hanchar, head of the Central Electoral Commission, played down the opposition's differences by saying on 15 May that "the point of the elections was to show that Lukashenka is not legitimate and start his removal. Only after that can we hold free, democratic elections," Reuters reported. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 17, 1999)

OSCE SAYS BELARUS' SHADOW ELECTIONS DESERVE 'RESPECT' Former Romanian Foreign Minister Adrian Severin, head of an OSCE mission visiting Belarus, said in Minsk on 18 May that the participation of "many citizens" in the opposition presidential elections "deserves the respect of democratically governed states." Severin added that Belarus

needs a "meaningful dialogue" to achieve a "nationwide consensus on the legal provisions for free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections." According to Severin, the OSCE is planning to hold talks in Bucharest involving the Belarusian authorities and the opposition "to explore ways and means that could bring about such democratic elections." AP reported. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 19, 1999)

NO WINNER IN BELARUS' SHADOW PRESIDENTIAL POLLS The Central Electoral Commission on 19 May announced the final results of the Belarusian opposition presidential elections, which took place from 6-16 May. Viktor Hanchar, head of the commission, said slightly more than 4 million voters, or 53 percent of the total electorate, cast ballots. That figure was sufficient for the vote to be declared valid. However, the commission ruled that the results of balloting were invalid because of "irregularities" during the vote, citing the "hostility" of the authorities, the absence of conditions for free election campaigning, and the "violation of the election law" by presidential candidate Zyanon Paznyak. Paznyak had withdrawn from the elections, claiming that the commission had falsified turnout figures. The commission announced it will organize another presidential poll within three months. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 20, 1999)

'UNOFFICIAL DATA' SHOW PAZNYAK CAME FIRST The Central Electoral Commission did not disclose the number of votes cast for Paznyak or Mikhail Chyhir in the opposition presidential elections. A correspondent for RFE/RL's Belarusian Service was told by a member of Paznyak's electoral staff that, according to "unofficial data," Paznyak won the poll with 2.37 million votes, while Chyhir gained 1.62 million votes. Meanwhile, Lyavon Barshcheuski, acting chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), said the BNF will address the Supreme Soviet with a request to assess the activities of the Central Electoral Commission. "While in the initial stages [of the election campaign] we had only a few allegations, the final stage has produced a scandal. It discredits all democrats in Belarus," Barshcheuski said. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 20, 1999)

LUKASHENKA DECREES PRICE REGULATION Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka on 19 May signed a decree on regulating prices and service charges, Belarusian Television reported. The decree bans any increase in the prices of specified goods and services without "adequate" social security measures. It provides for the government and the National Bank to set ceilings each year on increases in the price of Belarus-manufactured goods. And it establishes penalties for violations of its provisions. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 20, 1999)

INTERNATIONAL 'PLANS' SEEN BEHIND BELARUS'S ECONOMIC WOES Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Leonid Kozik told the National Assembly on 20 May that Belarus's economic crises in March and August 1998 resulted from deliberate efforts "conducted in accordance with plans worked out in some states of the world," BelaPAN reported. According to Kozik, those efforts were aimed at "undermining [Belarus'] people-oriented socioeconomic policy." He added that in August 1998, the international forces behind those efforts "sacrificed even the interests of the Russian Federation...in order to destroy the economy of the Republic of Belarus and prevent the further integration of the two states." (RFE/RL Newsline, May 21, 1999)

LUKASHENKA WANTS TO WORK WITH CURRENT CABINET UNTIL 2001 - Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has said he will not change his cabinet until the presidential elections in 2001, Belarusian Television reported on 21 May. Rumors about a possible dismissal of the government have been rife following Lukashenka's frequent criticism of the

cabinet's performance, in particular its inability to keep down inflation, which neared 60 percent in the first four months of this year. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 24, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION DEMANDS RELEASE OF FORMER PREMIER Some 1,000 people rallied in the Belarusian capital on 24 May to demand the release of former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir and "all political opponents of Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka," Interfax reported. The Belarusian opposition believes that Chyhir was arrested on trumped-up charges. He was taken into custody after he had registered as a candidate in the unauthorized presidential elections. Meanwhile, Prosecutor-General Aleh Bazhelka recently said that in his former capacity as bank head, Chyhir is suspected of having issued not only a "dubious \$1 million credit to a Canadian firm but also unjustifiable credits to various limited liability companies." RFE/RL's Belarusian service reported on 24 May. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 25, 1999)

OPPOSITION APPRAISES SHADOW PRESIDENTIAL POLL The opposition Supreme Soviet Presidium devoted its 24 May session to assessing the alternative Belarusian presidential poll, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. According to the presidium, the shadow elections showed that Belarusians are against Lukashenka's staying in power until 2001, as stipulated by the basic law adopted in the 1996 controversial referendum. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 25, 1999)

LUKASHENKA SAYS IMF POLICY TOWARD BELARUS 'UNFAIR' Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 25 May said he is not satisfied with relations between Belarus and the IMF. "The IMF's policy regarding Belarus is unfair and extremely politically motivated.... I can't name a single objective reason to justify such a low level of cooperation," AP quoted Lukashenka as saying after meeting with IMF official John Odling-Smee, who is in Minsk to prepare an annual report on the Belarusian economy. Belarus sought a \$100 million loan from the IMF last year, but the fund demanded changes in the country's economic policy. Odling-Smee told journalists on 26 May that the IMF "does not deem it possible" to issue a loan to Belarus, BelaPAN reported. He cited Belarus' failure to fulfill its pledges regarding systemic reforms and monetary policies as the main reason for refusing the credit. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 26, 1999)

BELARUSIAN PARTY OF COMMUNISTS DENIED REGISTRATION The Justice Ministry has denied registration to the opposition Belarusian Party of Communists (PKB), one of the country's two communist parties that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet-era Communist Party of Belarus (KPB), RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 26 May. The Justice Ministry explained its refusal to register the PKB by saying that the party cannot claim in its charter to be a successor to the KPB. According to PKB Chairman Syarhey Kalyakin, the Justice Ministry's move is "absurd." Kalyakin said the other communist organization, the pro-government Party of Communists of Belarus, is composed of "impostors." Under a presidential decree, all parties and public associations in Belarus must reregister by 1 July. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 27, 1999)

BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER FACES BAN The State Press Committee has issued its second warning to the newspaper "Navyiny" within one year, which gives grounds for the authorities to close the newspaper. The committee accused "Navyiny" of "stirring social enmity" in an article on Belarusian policemen published two weeks earlier. The first warning was issued in February after "Navyiny" had reported on the opposition presidential elections. "Navyiny" deputy chief editor Mikalay Khalezin told RFE/RL that the newspaper will

challenge the warning in court. But anticipating a worst-case scenario, it has already registered another newspaper under the title of "Nasa svaboda" in order to continue publication after "Naviny" is closed. The independent newspaper "Svaboda" made a similar move in 1997 when it was banned and resumed publication under the current name of "Naviny." (RFE/RL Newsline, May 27, 1999)

U.S. CONDEMNS REPRESSION IN BELARUS On May 20, the U.S. State Department used strong language to condemn the Belarusian authorities for suppressing the May 16 elections which Washington characterized as an effort to engage in a dialogue with the Belarusian people that "the regime has so far rejected." The statement cited President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's suppression of human rights and dismissed the charges against former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir, now in jail, as "trumped-up." In addition, it called on the Belarusian government "to change course" and open unconditional dialogue with the democratic opposition. In a statement before a Senate panel on the same day, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called attention to "the rise of repression in Belarus" and noted that the United States supports Belarusian NGOs and news media "to help opposition views reach the public." She was reacting to Lukashenka's crackdown on the independent sector, in the form of a demand that all NGOs, trade unions, and political parties reregister. Hundreds of groups are involved, and some of their leaders fear that a condition for reregistration will be a pledge of allegiance to Lukashenka's 1996 constitution, declared illegal by the Belarusian opposition and the West. (RFE/RL Watchlist, May 27, 1999)

LUKASHENKA TO NATIONALIZE TRADE IN COUNTRYSIDE Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 27 March attended a congress of the Belarusian Union of Consumer Cooperation, which deals with trade in consumer products in the countryside, Belarusian Television reported. Lukashenka accused the union of poor performance and announced that he will soon issue a decree subordinating to the state both the union and the consumer trade sector in the countryside. "You will be put under the most rigorous conditions, you will work [the way] all state structures are working in our republic," he told the congress. He also advised the union to earn hard currency by selling mushrooms and wild berries gathered by villagers in Belarusian woods directly to foreigners, bypassing intermediaries, whom he called "private dealers and swindlers." (RFE/RL Newsline, May 28, 1999)

OSCE PROPOSES TALKS BETWEEN BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES, OPPOSITION Following an earlier announcement by OSCE official Adrian Severin, the organization has offered to host talks between the Belarusian authorities and the opposition in Bucharest from 11-13 June, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 27 May. The talks would focus on three topics: executive power, media, and elections in Belarus. The OSCE also proposed a list of participants in the negotiations, which consists of representatives of the government, the political opposition, and Belarusian NGOs. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 28, 1999)

STAMPEDE IN MINSK METRO PASSAGEWAY KILLS 54 At least 54 people were killed and more than 100 injured in a stampede in an underground passageway to the Nyamiha metro station in Minsk on 30 May. The tragedy occurred after a crowd of young people had rushed from a nearby beer festival into the passage to avoid heavy rain. "The weather worsened sharply...and the crowd, some of whom were under the influence of alcohol, rushed to find cover." AP quoted Interior Minister Yuri Sivakou as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 31, 1999)

BELARUSIAN AGRICULTURAL MANAGER SENTENCED TO TWO YEARS

Vasil Staravoytau, former head of the Rassvet collective farm in Mahilyou Oblast, was sentenced on 29 May to two years hard labor and confiscation of property. It took 11 hours for a judge to read the verdict, which found the 74-year-old Staravoytau guilty of seven counts of embezzlement, attempted smuggling, abuse of power, bribery, and illegal weapons possession. Staravoytau, a World War II veteran, received some of the Soviet Union's highest honors, including three Orders of Lenin and two Hero of Socialist Labor awards. Before his arrest in 1997, Staravoytau became embroiled in a public dispute with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who had also headed a collective farm in the Mahilyou region during the Soviet era. Some independent newspapers have speculated that by indicting Staravoytau, Lukashenka took revenge on his more successful rival in farming. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 31, 1999)

POLAND PLANS A BELARUSIAN RADIO SERVICE On April 25, Belarusian Television reported that "a radio station, funded by the European Union and the USA, is being set up in Poland to broadcast not only anti-Belarusian, but also anti-Russian propaganda." According to Belarusian Television "it is being established to provoke and consolidate separatist sentiments in the western regions of Belarus. The Polish Council for Radio and Television has already issued a broadcasting license for the station, which will be situated in Bialystok. Poland..." (Belarus Update, Vol. 2, No.19, May 1999)

BELARUS MOURNS STAMPEDE VICTIMS The government has declared 1 and 2 June days of national mourning for the victims of the stampede in a Minsk metro passageway on 30 May. Fifty-two people died in that incident, while 80 have been hospitalized. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka offered condolences to the victims' families and ordered an investigation into the tragedy. "A dreadful, unexplainable tragedy took place. I ask the Belarusian people...to not accuse or judge [anybody].... Please do not allow this tragedy to become a reason for a split in our society," he commented. He suggested that the tragedy might be due to the authorities' "careless" attitude toward public gatherings. "We have been too careless with regard to those marches, escapades. Democracy [means]: let's walk until someone gets suffocated somewhere," he said on national television. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 1, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION SAYS GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBLE FOR TRAGIC STAMPEDE A group of Belarusian oppositionists has signed a statement saying that President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime is responsible for the tragic stampede in Minsk on 30 May. They argued that government has been seeking for several years to enlist popular support by giving free alcoholic drinks to impoverished citizens, including teenagers. The Minsk stampede, which claimed 52 lives, mostly teenage girls, occurred after a crowd of 2,500 people rushed into a metro passageway from a beer festival, where free beer had been served. Belarusian NGOs have formed a public commission to find out the reasons for the tragedy. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 2, 1999)

FORMER BELARUSIAN PREMIER TO REMAIN IN JAIL A district court in Minsk on 2 June rejected an appeal by Yuliya Chyhir to have her husband released from jail, Belapan reported. Former Premier Mikhail Chyhir was arrested at the end of March on charges of issuing a dubious bank loan in 1994 when he was a bank director. The court explained its refusal by saying that if released, Mikhail Chyhir might disappear in order to avoid investigation. According to Yuliya Chyhir, her husband's release would ensure that within a few

days, everything would "fall into place" as regards his criminal case. She noted that the authorities, however, do not desire such an outcome. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 3, 1999)

EYE-WITNESSES SAY OFFICIAL DEATH TOLL IN MINSK STAMPEDE INCORRECT - RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 3 June that the official number of people killed in the metro stampede in Minsk on 30 May is "at significant variance" with eye-witness reports. According to the authorities, 52 people died in that incident. A woman told RFE/RL that she did not find the names of her two killed friends on the official list of those who died. She also claimed to have seen a dead 10-year-old boy in the metro passageway who was not included on the official list. Meanwhile, Minsk Mayor Uladzimir Yarmoshyn has tendered his resignation, claiming a "moral burden" of responsibility for the tragic stampede. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has refused to accept his resignation, saying that society as a whole might be responsible. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 4, 1999)

STEPASHIN VOWS TO FINALIZE UNION TREATY WITH BELARUS - During his meeting with Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Minsk on 4 June, Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin pledged to step up efforts to prepare a full-fledged draft treaty on the Russia-Belarus union. "With regard to Russian-Belarusian relations, I fully support your positions.... It is time to move from words to work," Belarusian Television quoted Stepashin as telling Lukashenka. Stepashin added that Russian President Boris Yeltsin instructed him to work "openly and honestly" with "[our] Belarusian brothers." Lukashenka, for his part, expressed his satisfaction with the composition of Russia's new cabinet. "I am glad that we will not have to start all over again," he commented. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 7, 1999)

DRAFT BELARUS-RUSSIA UNION TREATY DOES NOT ENVISION PRESIDENCY - Working commissions have agreed on a final draft of the Belarusian-Russian union treaty. Alyaksandr Kozyr, head of the International Affairs Commission in the Belarusian Chamber of Representatives, told RFE/RL that the draft treaty stipulates the creation of a "soft confederation," whereby both countries preserve their sovereign state functions and supranational bodies will be of an advisory character. The document does not provide for the posts of president or vice president of the union. Rather, the union is to be governed by a body consisting of the presidents, prime ministers, and parliamentary heads of the two countries. A union-parliamentary assembly will be formed from deputies delegated by each parliament. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 8, 1999)

WILL BELARUSIAN POLITICAL DIALOGUE IN BUCHAREST TAKE PLACE? - It is unclear whether the Belarusian authorities will be represented at the OSCE-proposed meeting in Bucharest on 11-14 June between Belarusian officialdom and the opposition. Both the Belarusian National Assembly and the presidential administration have refused to comment on the proposed meeting. Meanwhile, the Chamber of Representatives, lower house of the National Assembly, has adopted a statement saying it is ready to inaugurate a dialogue with Belarusian "social and political circles" in a bid to "improve legislation within the framework of the constitution in force," Belarusian Television reported on 8 June. The statement adds that the legislature is ready to hold the dialogue in Minsk. It makes no mention of the OSCE proposal to hold the talks in Bucharest. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 9, 1999)

COUNCIL OF EUROPE URGES BELARUS TO HOLD FREE ELECTIONS - The Council of Europe on 9 June called on Belarus to hold free elections under international supervision. In a statement, it commented that "internationally observed

and accepted free and fair elections will be the first step toward rebuilding Belarus' relations with the Council of Europe." Belarus lost its special-guest status in the council in 1996, when President Alyaksandr Lukashenka disbanded the legitimate parliament. The council also appealed to the Belarusian government to release former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir, whose arrest is widely seen as politically motivated. Lukashenka said the same day that Belarus' dialogue with the OSCE and other European organizations must be based on "non-interference in internal affairs." Meanwhile, the Belarusian government has not responded to an OSCE offer to hold talks with the opposition in Bucharest on 11-14 June. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 10, 1999)

LUKASHENKA SAYS 'ALL OF US LOST' IN BALKAN CRISIS - "Not only [Yugoslav President Slobodan] Milosevic, but all of us lost in the Balkans. We have suffered a crushing defeat and we will soon convince ourselves [of that]," BelaPAN quoted Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka as saying on 11 June. The Belarusian president also commented on the opposition presidential election initiative and on Russian State Duma deputy Viktor Ilyukhin's statement this week that U.S. special services and NATO are preparing an operation in Belarus to topple Lukashenka. "Those brainless people in the West who plan such operations . . . do not know our reality. There is no basis for shattering our society [to the extent of] removing Lukashenka," Belarusian Television quoted the president as saying. Lukashenka added that if Milosevic asked for political asylum, Belarus would grant it to him. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 11, 1999)

LUKASHENKA SAYS HE MAY RUN FOR BELARUSIAN-RUSSIAN UNION PRESIDENCY - Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka told the 11 June "Tribuna" that he may run for the post of president of the Belarusian-Russian Union if such a position is created. "If my rating is fairly high, there will surely be people willing to nominate me. If not, why should I run?" Lukashenka said. The draft union treaty that was agreed to in early June does not provide for the post of union president. Meanwhile, there has been speculation in the Russian press that Russian President Boris Yeltsin may take advantage of the creation of the Belarusian-Russian Union to remain in power by assuming the post of its first president. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 14, 1999)

THREE SENTENCED FOR MURDER, TERRORIST ACT PLOT AGAINST LUKASHENKA - Belarus' Supreme Court on 11 June sentenced three residents of Mahileu—Viktar Yancheuski, Anatol Haurylau, and Raman Radzikouski—for their roles in the murder of Yauhen Mikalutski, a regional presidential official in Mahileu, and for preparing a terrorist act against the president. President Lukashenka said last year that the case of Mikalutski, who was killed in a bombing on 6 October 1997, was connected to an attempt on his life and suggested that a plan to assassinate the Belarusian president was prepared in the Drazdy residential compound, near Minsk, where several Western ambassadors had their residences. The court sentenced Yancheuski to 11 years in prison, Haurylau to five years, and Radzikouski to four years, though Radzikouski was immediately freed under an amnesty. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 14, 1999)

OSCE LAUNCHES POLITICAL DIALOGUE IN BELARUS, BUT WITHOUT GOVERNMENT - Representatives of the Belarusian opposition and NGOs participated in the OSCE-sponsored hearings on Belarus in Bucharest on 11-14 June. OSCE official Adrian Severin told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on 14 June that the main goal of the hearings was to find a "solution to how to hold free and fair elections [in Belarus]...which could be recognized on both the domestic

and international level." Severin said the hearings were successful in working out a single stance of the Belarusian opposition on the issue of elections, adding that the meeting has inaugurated a "long and difficult process" of political dialogue in Belarus. Official Minsk, though invited, boycotted the Bucharest meeting. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 15, 1999)

BELARUSIAN PEASANT PARTY DEFIES REREGISTRATION DECREE - The Belarusian Peasant Party has refused to comply with the presidential decree on reregistration of political parties and public associations in Belarus. Under the decree, all Belarusian parties and organizations are obliged to reregister with the Justice Ministry by 1 July. "We think that this decree violates the constitution, in particular, Article 101 part 2, which stipulates that the president has no right to issue decrees that change the basic law. Therefore, [the reregistration] is an anti-constitutional action," party leader Mikhail Antanienka told RFE/RL. According to the Justice Ministry, only some 10 percent of the public organizations in Belarus have reregistered. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 15, 1999)

BELARUS, RUSSIA DISCUSS INTRODUCING SINGLE CUSTOMS RATES - In Minsk on 15 June the State Customs Committees of Belarus and Russia discussed the introduction of single customs rates within the Belarus-Russia Customs Union, Belarusian Television reported. "In 1997 the difference between the two customs tariffs was minimal. Today we have differences regarding hundreds of items in the customs tariff [table]," Belarusian Television quoted Russian State Customs Committee head Mikhail Vanin as saying. Vanin added that Russia has lost \$600 million in customs dues for motor vehicles crossing Belarus. "One cannot say that Russia suffers, while Belarus gains. Unfortunately, we [also] have a lot of such decisions that place our Belarus and its partners at a disadvantage," Belarusian State Customs Committee head Vasil Makarevich commented. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 16, 1999)

BELARUSIANS FEAR ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS, CRIMINALITY, NATO In a Minsk poll carried out by the BelaPAN sociological service "Zerkalo" from 10-13 June, 44 percent of respondents said they are afraid of being unable to buy foodstuffs and essential goods because of price hikes. Thirty percent are afraid of becoming a victim of criminal activities, while 26 percent fear a "NATO intervention in Belarus's affairs and the repetition of what is taking place in Yugoslavia," BelaPAN reported on 17 June. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 18, 1999)

LUKASHENKA TO MAKE WEST BUY BELARUSIAN PRODUCTS During his visit to the "Khimvalakno" plant of chemical fibers in Mahileu on 17 June, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka stressed that his country's main problem is finding ways to sell its products abroad. "The main thing is to sell, because we have a fight going on today," Belarusian Television quoted him as saying. He noted that Russia had opened its borders and could now buy its fibers from countries other than Belarus. Lukashenka added that Belarus can make the West buy Belarusian products. "If they do not buy our goods, we will keep them out [of Belarus]," he said. At the same time, he pledged to "sort out things" with Poland, Germany, and Turkey, and to "react adequately" to the anti-dumping taxes imposed by these countries on Belarusian goods, including chemical fibers. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 19, 1999)

WORLD BANK RESTORES TIES WITH BELARUS Paul Siegelbaum, director of the World Bank's department for Ukraine and Belarus, said on 18 June that the bank will re-establish a permanent representative in Belarus after an

absence of some 10 months. On 21 June Serhiy Kulyk, a Ukrainian national and career diplomat, will take up the position discontinued by the World Bank last September to protest Belarus's refusal to speed up privatization, remove price controls, and introduce a single exchange rate. "Belarus is a place where it is possible to take many unusual decisions," Kulyk said in Minsk on 18 June. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 21, 1999)

BELARUSIAN WRITERS' UNION HEAD NOT TO RETURN HOME Belarusian poet Uladzimir Nyaklyayeu, chairman of the Union of Belarusian Writers, told journalists in Warsaw on 20 June that he has decided not to return to Belarus. BelaPAN reported on 21 June. Nyaklyayeu, who came to Warsaw for an international literary seminar, said his friend warned him last week that a "big provocation" is being prepared against him in Belarus. Nyaklyayeu did not rule out that the authorities may fabricate a case against him on charges of financial misdeeds, as they allegedly did to former Premier Mikhail Chyhir. The poet noted, however, that the main reason for his staying abroad is his belief that it is impossible to conduct a dialogue with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Nyaklyayeu added that the presidential retinue is composed of people who are indifferent to the future of the Belarusian language, culture, and literature. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 21, 1999)

BELARUSIAN POPULAR FRONT TO HOLD CONGRESS ON 31 JULY The opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) has decided to hold its congress on 31 July-1 August in Minsk. According to an RFE/RL correspondent in Minsk, the congress will be "heated" because it is widely expected to address changes in the BNF leadership. Some prominent BNF activists have disagreed with BNF exiled leader Zyanon Paznyak's decision to withdraw from the opposition presidential elections in May, claiming that Paznyak harmed not only his organization but the entire opposition to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 22, 1999)

BELARUSIAN NATIONAL BANK TO CONTROL OFFSHORE OPERATIONS - In a move intended to stop the outflow of hard currency from the country, the Belarusian National Bank has ordered commercial banks to report on customers who transfer money to offshore company deposits, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 22 June. A list of offshore tax havens supplied by the National Bank contains 47 geographical names. According to an RFE/RL Minsk correspondent, the order is a "quite logical" step in the current policy of the Belarusian government to eliminate intermediaries in trade operations. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 23, 1999)

BELARUSIAN PREMIER IN LITHUANIA. Belarusian Prime Minister Syarhey Linh visited Lithuania on 22 June. In a discussion with Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus about Belarus's outstanding energy debt, Linh indicated a readiness to pay: "We will by all means settle this debt and we intended to [earlier] but [the] financial crisis which severely hit Russia and Belarus prevented us from paying it back timely and swiftly," ELTA reported. Linh led a business delegation taking part in an exposition in Vilnius. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian parliament ratified an agreement on social issues with Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 23, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEGISLATURE HOLDS SESSION ON THE STREET Thirty-eight deputies of the opposition Supreme Soviet gathered on 23 June in a Minsk restaurant to hold a session, but were driven out by a special-purpose police detachment that claimed that a bomb had been planted in the restaurant. "The story with the bomb has been planned much earlier, and it is characteristic of the regime [of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka]," Supreme Soviet chairman Syamyon

Sharetski told an RFE/RL correspondent. The session continued on the street near the restaurant. The Supreme Soviet adopted an appeal to Lukashenka for political dialogue in Belarus. According to the 1994 constitution, to which the Supreme Soviet remains loyal, Lukashenka's presidential term expires on 20 July. The Belarusian opposition expects that U.S. and European countries will cease to recognize Lukashenka as the legitimate leader after that date. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 24, 1999)

BELARUSIAN GOVERNMENT REPORTS AVERAGE WAGE INCREASE IN MAY According to the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis, the average monthly gross wage of blue-collar and white-collar workers in May amounted to 18.5 million Belarusian rubles (\$42 according to the unofficial exchange rate), up from \$33 in April. The rise is due to the government's decision to double the minimum wage last month. One year ago the average amounted to \$72. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 24, 1999)

BELARUSIAN-RUSSIAN CONFEDERATION TO BE LAUNCHED ON 20 JULY? Mikalay Syarheyev, leader of the pro-Russian organization "Belaya Rus," said in Minsk on 22 June that Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka are preparing to sign a treaty on the creation of a confederation called the Union of Sovereign Republics (SSR) of Russia and Belarus. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 24 June. According to Syarheyev, the confederation will be headed by a president and two vice-presidents - one from Russia, the other from Belarus. The alleged signing ceremony is to take place in Moscow on 20 July, the last day of Lukashenka's presidency according to the 1994 constitution he abolished in 1996 following a controversial constitutional referendum. Meanwhile, the Russian media have abounded with speculations that Yeltsin may take advantage of the creation of a new Russian-Belarusian state to prolong his presidency. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 25, 1999)

BELARUSIANS PRAY FOR MOTHER TONGUE "Merciful God, forgive those who debase our language, our people, our history and do not punish them too severely, because they do not know what they do," Belarusians prayed in Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches throughout the country on 27 June. "Gazeta Wyborcza" reported the next day. The prayer was written by a 16-year-old student from Minsk who won a contest organized by the Belarusian Language Society, which is devoted to supporting Belarusians' native language. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime has closed down some 600 Belarusian-language schools since coming to power in 1994.

Today, only 11 percent of Belarusian children are instructed at schools in their mother tongue. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 28, 1999)

NO MONEY TO PAY WAGES IN BELARUS? Addressing the National Assembly last week, Finance Minister Mikalay Korbut said his ministry is unable either to pay wages or finance the purchase of medicines. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 28 June. Former Labor Minister Alyaksandr Sasnou told RFE/RL that Korbut's statement may mean a change in the ongoing practice of extensive money emissions whenever the government faces financial difficulties. Sasnou suggested that the country's main proponent of such emissions, National Bank Chairman Pyotr Prakapovich, may have recently fallen from grace with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Prakapovich told the National Assembly the same day that owing to a lack of foreign credits, the bank issued 50 trillion Belarusian rubles (some \$200 million) in the first half of 1999 "to ensure economic growth." (RFE/RL Newsline, June 29, 1999)

BELARUS SUFFERS FROM FUEL SHORTAGE RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 29 June that Belarus is suffering from an acute shortage of gasoline at filling stations. The authorities have so far not commented on the problem. According to independent experts, the lack of gasoline is caused by reduced Russian oil supplies. The Belnaftakhim concern, which has a monopoly on the country's fuel market, is unable to pay Russian oil suppliers and currently owes them some \$80 million. Also, Belnaftakhim is obliged by the government to provide fuel to the agricultural sector, which has no money to pay for those supplies. Another reason for the fuel shortage is the relatively low price of gasoline in Belarus. Independent experts say that the government maintains the current low prices for gasoline for fear of triggering another spiral of inflation. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 30, 1999)

YELTSIN, LUKASHENKA MAKING RETIREMENT PLANS ? In the latest of a series of articles picking up on speculation that the Kremlin is working to keep Russian president Boris Yeltsin in an executive position as head of a Belarus-Russia confederation, "Segodnya" on 29 June argues that the union of the two countries' armies presents the ideal vehicle for strengthening such efforts. According to the daily, attempts to unite Belarus and Russia have failed because of the "complete incompatibility of the economies and administrative systems of the two countries," but "joining the two slivers of the former Soviet Army seems more promising." (RFE/RL Newsline, June 30, 1999)

MEDIA WATCH

BOOK REVIEW

Belarus: A Denationalized Nation, by David R. Marples (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999, 139 pp, softcover \$19.95, clothcover \$33.00). Available from the publisher: Harwood Academic Publishers, PO Box 90, Reading, Berks, RG1 8JL, UK; or Barnes & Noble, Web site <http://www.bn.com>.

This book, the author's second, forms part of his continuing research on Belarus. His first book was *Belarus: From Soviet*

Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe, published in 1996.

The book sets out to "examine the contemporary situation in Belarus: the country's politics, society, and economy, with the intention of providing a useful guide for scholars, university and college students, and for those doing business in or visiting Belarus." Belarus remains relatively neglected among Western scholars, and in an effort to remedy the situation, the author traveled widely throughout the country over the past five years. He admits, however, that he spent more time with democrats and reformers than with members of the government or the Communist nomenclatura.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides a brief history of the Belarusian lands from earliest times to the Gorbachev period. Chapter 2 examines the economy in the decade from 1986 to 1996. Chapter 3 looks at the period of perestroika and independence (1985-1993). Chapters 4 and 5 provide a detailed picture of the tumultuous political changes under Lukashenka, with a concentration on domestic issues. Chapter 6 focuses on Belarusian relations with Russia, including the recent Act of Union.

Marples seeks answers to the following questions: Can Belarus can survive as an independent state? "Has [Belarus] relinquished its independence already? If it

survives, what form will this survival take?" Political aspects of the present regime are discussed, as is the decline of the population in recent times. The author believes that a Belarusian state will survive into the next century.

Marples is of the view that many of the changes introduced by Lukashenka exist more in theory than in reality. This is particularly true with regard to the formation of the Union with Russia. He sees many basic differences between the two countries and thinks that discussion of the various facets of the Union in the future is likely to pull them further apart rather than draw them together.

According to Marples, the human rights situation is especially disturbing in Belarus. He cites the following examples: no assistance is afforded in the event of arbitrary arrest; new repressive laws are introduced almost daily; the press is systematically silenced; television is increasingly becoming the direct mouthpiece of the president; referenda and elections are ruthlessly manipulated; telephone lines are frequently tapped; demonstrators are routinely beaten and thrown into jail. The tentacles of the presidency reach into every sphere of life. Belarus' society resembles a pyramid with the president at its pinnacle. Belarus serves as an example and warning to other post-Soviet states of the dangers of unlimited presidential power. "Were Belarusians seeking a new Stalin? Or did many of them swallow the official propaganda that those arrested were enemies of the state?," asks the author. What is surprising, points out Marples, is that despite such repressions, the president remains popular.

The author notes that at various international conferences over the past few years, he has frequently encountered criticism of Russia for its seeming desire to swallow up Belarus. In Marples' opinion, while Belarus can adopt the pro-European policies espoused by such opposition leaders as BPF's Zianon Pazniak, for example, — it cannot completely turn its back on association with Russia. "One can chastise the extent of Russification or the domination of the Russian language in Belarus, but one cannot deny their existence or eradicate them, in Lukashenka style, by a presidential decree."

Marples argues that not everything about Russia is bad. "On the one hand, [Russia] may seem, given past history, like a predator, wishing to link up with and annex its former partners in the USSR. On the other hand, it is thanks partly to Russia that reforms have taken place at all in Belarus. The Russian media have exposed the brutality of some of the actions of the Belarusian militia and the presidential guard

in 1995-1997. ... Moreover, Boris Yeltsin has committed his government to the reform process, a factor that Lukashenka cannot ignore. The Belarusian government has few other friends at present."

The author believes that the solution to the Belarusian dilemma is far more likely to come from the East than the West, that integration and union with Russia remain more theoretical than actual, and that integration can also mean different things to each side. In his view, it is vital that Belarus maintains its links with Russian reformers and democrats. "Economically, the country is unlikely to extricate itself from the Russian orbit. Russia, on the other hand, is hardly seeking an economic millstone around its neck."

Marples' conclusion sounds cautiously optimistic. Belarus, he believes, will survive into the 21st century, but as a Eurasian rather than a European state. Such an outcome would hardly evoke cheers from Belarusian nationalists who don't believe Russia will ever change her spots.

One should mention that the author lists many *Belarusian Review* articles in his bibliography as reference material used in the book

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PRESS REVIEW

Lukashenka, the Menace (*The Washington Post*, editorial "Europe's Other Dictator," April 20, 1999)

The editorial says that it is too easy to dismiss Lukashenka "but it would be a mistake to underestimate [him] and the menace he represents." "He would like Belarus to reunite with Russia ... His instigation of a 'Slavic Union' of Russia, Belarus and Yugoslavia is one more step on that path ... Even if ... these 'unions' never come to pass, Mr. Lukashenko's tyranny exerts a baleful influence on the young democracies such as Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland that surround his nation."

The editorial agrees that the people who suffer most from his policies live inside Belarus. Standards of living have declined. He abrogated the constitution and made a mockery of democracy. Those who speak out against his rule risk exile or prison.

The editorial concludes: "Mr. Lukashenko can no longer claim to speak for his nation. The West ... should take Serbia as a lesson on how much damage even small-time dictators can cause. That means reaching out to the democrats of Belarus who continue to oppose the Milosevic-Lukashenko axis."



Belarus Concert Tragedy (*Los Angeles Times*, "Survivors Recall Stampede After Belarus Concert Tragedy," June 1, 1999.)

"Tanya Shelabina, 15, wanted to have some fun at a 'beer concert,' an outdoor festival in Minsk, the capital of Belarus. It nearly cost her life," reports the article. Describing the event, the article says: "The 'beer concert', an event sponsored by a radio station and a brewing company, was staged at the open-air Sports Palace in Central Minsk. About 10,000 people attended, and witnesses said many members of the crowd were drunk. When rain and hail began to fall, 2,000 concert-goers raced to a nearby station for shelter. As they ran down the steps, some teenage girls in high-heeled shoes slipped and fell on the wet floor. From behind, people kept coming, trampling those who had fallen. The crowd surged forward through the narrow passageway, crushing and suffocating others. Police officers who tried to restore order were swept away, were swept away and crushed too."

In all, 53 people died — including 42 teenage girls and three police officers — in the worst tragedy to strike Belarus since the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. An additional 158 people were injured, many of them suffering broken limbs, backs and necks. "It is so inexplicably horrific," a grim President Alexander G. Lukashenko said as he toured the scene of the stampede the next day. "The disaster appears likely to further tarnish the image of the impoverished country of 10 million people and its isolationist president, who has maintained power in part by repressing dissent," opines the article. Critics quickly questioned why crowd-control police — who regularly break up pro-democracy rallies — were not deployed in sufficient numbers to handle a concert crowd, observes the article. Lukashenko appealed to his foes not to use the event to further their political goals or divide the country. "Please do not accuse or convict anybody," Lukashenko said. "This is a mournful occasion for the whole country as well as for the families of the dead. Please do not allow this to split society or become an object of a political game."

LETTERS

European Union Policy Toward Belarus

Mr. Santer has well received your letter of 12 April 1999, including a copy of the spring issue of *Belarusian Review* concerning violation of human rights in Belarus. The European Commission is well aware of the difficult situation in Belarus, in particular after the November 1996 referendum that provoked a constitutional crisis in the country.

Despite other deeply concerning events in the region, the European Union continues to follow closely developments in Belarus, such as the Belarusian opposition's initiative of presidential elections on 6-16 May. Considering the circumstances in which the voting took place, these elections could not be recognised by the international community. The Electoral Commission itself eventually had to declare the vote void for this reason. However, the European Union officially stated that Belarusian people should have the opportunity to express themselves democratically on the political and constitutional questions confronting Belarus. The European Union also demanded that the Belarusian government free Mr Chigir immediately.

The European Union continues to be of the opinion that the only possible and peaceful way out of the present constitutional impasse in Belarus is an open and constructive dialogue between the government and the opposition, the latter intended in its broadest sense. Consequently, the European Union has repeatedly called upon the Belarusian government to establish such a dialogue and on the Belarusian opposition to show a positive approach towards it. This opinion is shared by the Western community and very much promoted by the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus.

The European Union remains vigilant on developments in Belarus and will continue to press for a peaceful and democratic solution to the constitutional issue.

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Belarus: Attention Must Be Paid!

Quixotic though this exercise may be, much as Andy Rooney blows off his steam every Sunday night on "60 Minutes", I would like to use your "Letters" forum to express some of my concerns about an issue that is both important and painful to me as a Belarusian - and that is the short shrift that Western foreign policy pays to my homeland.

In an era of world colonization, the US government formulated what proved to be its most lasting foreign affairs document - the Monroe Doctrine, an instrument which protected Latin America from European expansion and clearly defined America's position toward the rest of the world. Today, on an ever-shrinking planet, the American government has embraced a doctrine of humanitarianism and protection of human rights everywhere. But does this policy reflect a real concern for human rights in the world - or is it merely a beard which allows the US government to selectively establish its influence and interests in points of its own choosing?

The US monitors the protection of human rights in Africa, Asia Minor, Latin America, and most recently in the former Yugoslavia. Very often, this monitoring exercise forces interference in a given country's internal

affairs, i.e. the war in Kosovo and attempts to get rid of Milosevic. Yet when it comes to a country like Belarus, the US is reluctant to help depose a dictator of Lukashenka's ilk. Why the double standard? Is it because we do not want to upset the imperialist sensitivities of Russia? Or is there some "scale of worthiness" that world powers consult before they intervene in a given nation? If so, surely Belarus is somewhere on the bottom rung.

How else does one explain the West's muted response to Belarus' suffering in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster? 70% of radioactive fallout landed in Belarus - yet western assistance to victims there, especially children, was sporadic and half-hearted at best.

Politicians offer various excuses for the world community's neglect of Belarusian issues. People in Belarus do not protest or demonstrate en masse, they claim. Nobody is murdered, citizens are neither harassed nor imprisoned on a significant scale. But must we wait for conditions in Belarus to deteriorate to a point that another Kosovo erupts?

The truth, in fact, is that people in Belarus are routinely harassed and imprisoned. Some former government officials that fell out of favor with the president have recently disappeared without a trace. Demonstrations by the opposition - demands for democratic and independent rule, freedom of expression and the right to use their native language - are staged regularly. Just recently, the country's independent parties mounted a presidential campaign to demonstrate the widespread desire for change. Were their efforts too peaceful to warrant western attention?

We all know that the mass media is a powerful weapon in effecting change. The western media, however, pays meager attention to the plight of the democratic opposition in Belarus. Although the print media (New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, etc.) have increased coverage over the last few years, western broadcast media almost never mention events in Belarus. Recently 53 young people were trampled to death in a freak accident in the center of Minsk. Many more were hospitalized, and humanitarian aid from the west would have been welcomed - had the media publicized the disaster.

Finally, there is the issue of history. In our global society, it is incumbent both upon journalists and diplomats serving in foreign countries to become thoroughly familiar with the history of their designated country. One cannot understand what is happening in Belarus today by simply reviewing events that transpired in this century. An understanding of the country's early history is as vital here as it is in Yugoslavia.

To my knowledge, there is only one organization - the International League for Human Rights - which deserves special recognition for its sincere and consistent efforts to effect democratic change in Belarus. One organization in a sea of hundreds is not enough, however. The situation in Belarus today begs for and deserves the serious and focused attention of not only the western media but also the legislative and executive bodies of the democratic West.

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